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SEP 11

EDITORIAL

OUTSIDER'S CHANCE

The dead-in-the-water campaign for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination is suddenly lively and animated. It's an alien life form, however, of marginal or unknown creatures who on the face of it have little base and smaller prospects, and are therefore objects of ridicule or scorn.

There's former Governor Jerry Brown, who can't escape his Zenny past and spacey reputation. There is a trio of other "formers": peace activist Larry Agran, a three-term Mayor of Irvine, California; Paul Tsongas, a one-term Senator from Massachusetts; and Lyndon LaRouche, a former Trotskyist and con (for scamming money from fans). Then there's Governor Douglas Wilder of Virginia, whose main attraction seems to be his (slight) potential for drawing black support away from Jesse Jackson, and a few other sitting politicians of medium merit: Senator Tom Harkin, Governor Bill Clinton, Senator Bob Kerrey. And now there's a nascent movement (announced in an ad in this issue) to draft Ralph Nader.

Some of the above are intriguing and progressive politicians, some are merely suffering from bland ambition, LaRouche is a nut case, and here at *The Nation* there's more than a soft spot for brother Nader.

The conventional wisdom is that, lacking a clear front-runner, the Dems should pick a conventional candidate at their party convention. But voters are bored with the smarmy neoliberals touted by party insiders. The quirkiness of the current candidates symbolizes public dissatisfaction with traditional candidacies. What's needed is an unconventional candidate, an outsider who will motivate other outsiders—that 50 percent who have turned off and dropped out of the political system with good reason—to go to the polls and vote. Otherwise we face the depressing prospect of four more years of Bush and maybe fourteen or forty more of Reagan, Bush, Quayle, ad infinitum.

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E.P. Thompson
Richard J. Barnet
Joanne Landy
Boris Kagarlitsky
Aleksandr Tsipko
Zhores A. Medvedev
Roy Medvedev

WHY WE READ
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BLACKS, JEWS AND SURVIVAL
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THOMAS, NO!
Bruce Shapiro

ANNE SEXTON
Grace Schulman

UP AGAINST THE SYSTEM

THE LITTLE SCHOOLS THAT COULD

DEBORAH W. MEIER

"Too Good for Its Own Good? Bronx School Backs Quality" ran the front-page August 10 headline of *The New York Times*. The story was about the threatened closure of the Bronx New School, a small, highly innovative elementary school in New York City, on the eve of moving to its larger site. The new District Superintendent, John Reehill, was quoted as saying that the school was too autonomous, that its effort to maintain a racial balance and its insistence on being different made it "elitist," too much like a "private school." He said he intended to dismiss its teacher-director and merge it with another, more traditional school.

All over the country efforts similar to the Bronx New School face or have met similar fates. The question is, Why? What's puzzling is not that such schools make enemies but that their enemies are so successful in today's presumably pro-reform educational climate. Brave groups of parents and teachers stick their necks out, but their work rarely gets off the ground, or if it does get off the ground the schools they invent rarely survive the founding fathers and mothers. They get subtly or not so subtly transformed by bringing in new leadership more "compatible" with the system and less "abrasive," more beholden to the authorities above, not to the school's own constituents. And where they succeed in avoiding all these pitfalls, they know enough to keep a low profile.

Rather than contributing to the reform movement, such schools have quietly gone underground, praying just to sneak through another year. The innovators shun the

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LETTERS.

RED DAWN IN ALABAMA?

Berkeley, Calif.

I was happy to read Jon Wiener's favorable review of Robin Kelley's book *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* ["The Red and the Black," June 24]. However, as one of the Communist Party union organizers in Alabama during the 1930s, I take issue with Wiener's emphasis that we devoted our time to "selling" the Soviet Union. The field organizers based their efforts on the needs and problems of the people. We spoke favorably of the Soviet Union.

Communists were not isolated in unions, as Wiener suggests. In 1934 we organized a few steel fabricating plants, with white and black party members doing the job. Some of them were elected as local union officials. The first union contract we signed was signed by a white and a black union officer . . . perhaps the first union contract in Alabama signed by a black. They were Communists.

We developed a strong base in the United Mine Workers in 1934 and led the fight for district autonomy, which John L. Lewis granted. In the big Wylam coal mine a Communist, who was black, was elected to a key job of checkweighman, when most of the members were white. In Bessemer that same year Communists helped save the Red Ore Strike from defeat by leading the fight for strike relief from the Welfare Office.

The C.I.O. did not replace the C.P. in the affections of blacks. When the C.I.O. got started in 1935 the district C.I.O. director, Bill Mitch, a former Socialist, hired a large number of white and black Communists out of the local unions because they were recognized leaders and organizers.

In 1935 I was assigned to the Share Croppers' Union as an organizer. After the disastrous cotton pickers' strike in Lowndes County (see my September 18, 1935, article in *The Nation* under the pseudonym Albert Jackson), I fought for a C.P. policy of working with the National Farmers Union. The national C.P. convention agreed. In Alabama we dumped the K.K.K. officials out of the state Farmers Union leadership. Socialists helped. The entire Share Croppers' Union program was accepted and approved by the Alabama Farmers Union convention. The transfer of key organizers (Tex McIntire and me) and the shift to a war economy were the major factors in diminishing the achievements of the Farmers Union in the South.

Communists were instrumental in helping elect Lister Hill to the U.S. Senate through their work in the Alabama Farmers Union and the C.I.O. His opponent was Cotton Tom Heflin, a state leader of the K.K.K. As Senator, Hill supported legislation promoted by the C.I.O.

Nationally Communists helped organize a coalition in the National Farmers Union to remove Coughlinite officials in the national convention and switch its program to support the C.I.O.

I think Robin Kelley does an excellent job portraying the role of the C.P. in Alabama. His doctoral thesis for U.C.L.A., on which the book is based, contains much more of the Alabama C.P. story. Unfortunately it is fashionable today to project the failures of the Soviet Union onto real achievements of the American C.P. in the past. Jon Wiener, an able historian of an earlier period of Alabama's history, should not let the current political program blind him to the truths of the 1930s.

Clyde Johnson

BLACK NATION

San Jose, Calif.

Jon Wiener writes that the Communist Party's concept of the African-American people as constituting an "oppressed nation" was one that "had never been put forward by blacks in the United States." The contrary is true. The feeling of nationality and of being an oppressed nation is one of the fundamental features of African-American history.

I published an essay, "Consciousness of Negro Nationality to 1900," back in 1940; it is reprinted in *Toward Negro Freedom*. If Professor Wiener will glance at the indexes to volumes two and three of my *Documentary History of the Negro People* (first published in 1951 and 1973 and again available) he will find twenty-eight references to expressions of Negro nationality from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

This sense of oppressed nationality evoked demands from some black people in the late nineteenth century that what became Oklahoma be set apart as their own state; in the 1930s there was a movement among some black people for the creation of an all-black "49th state."

The differences between Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany hinged on this question of nationality. W.E.B. Du Bois frequently employed the concept; one of his essays, published in 1935, is titled "A Negro Nation Within the Nation."

Of course, one need only mention figures like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X to illustrate further how significant this sense of nationality has been in the African-American experience. It is likely that this reality helps account for the considerable impact of the program the C.P.U.S.A. first enunciated some fifty-five years ago.

Herbert Aptheker

WIENER REPLIES

Irvine, Calif.

Clyde Johnson is one of the heroes of Southern radicalism in the thirties; I'm sorry I didn't have more space to write about his work, and I thank him for his letter.

Herbert Aptheker writes that America has a long history of black nationalism. No one would disagree. I wrote that American blacks had never put forward the claim made by the Communist International in 1928 that "the Negroes of the Black Belt counties of the American South constituted an 'oppressed nation' with a 'right of self-determination.' " The call for an independent Negro nation in the twenties and the thirties focused on Africa and the West Indies. You will not find Du Bois or Marcus Garvey (or Malcolm X) calling for an independent black nation-state within the American South. Nor had black American Communists ever put forward such a demand, according to Mark Naison's book *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*. When the Soviets presented the idea to the Comintern's Negro Commission in 1928, he writes, the black American Communists attending the Comintern convention "all initially objected to the resolution." The party itself abandoned the idea in 1935. Nevertheless, as I wrote in my piece, "by defining blacks as an oppressed nation, even in Stalin's unlikely formulation, the Communists had endowed the black struggle with dignity and significance." Does Herbert Aptheker disagree?

Jon Wiener

FASCIST TOOL

Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

I am a violinist who performed in the orchestra that accompanied the fireworks display at the South Street Seaport's troop-welcoming orgy ["The Video War Comes Home," July 1]. Many musicians in that orchestra fully shared your revulsion at that Orwellian event but participated either because we tried to separate music from politics or because we were unaware of the nature of the concert when we accepted the engagement. I would like to comment, however, that you were perhaps unfair to Richard Strauss in referring to him as "one of the Nazis' favorite composers." Strauss could certainly be faulted for his failure to take a more defiant stand against Hitler, particularly when he conducted at the 1933 Bayreuth Festival in place of Toscanini, who had refused to conduct in protest of Nazi racism. Strauss, however, was hardly supportive of Hitler. He refused to honor Nazi orders to abandon his librettist Stefan Zweig, a Jew; had his opera *Die schweigsame Frau* boycotted by Hitler and soon banned; and was forced to resign his post as president of the Reichsmusikkammer. Tensions between regime and composer continued through the end of the war, his meager conciliations with Nazi authorities being only in deference to the welfare of his Jewish daughter-in-law and her children. That Strauss had held an official position under the fascists reflects both Strauss's excessive apoliticism and his value to the Nazis as a propaganda tool, not any empathy between the composer and the fascist maniacs who destroyed his country.

Thomas Suarez

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EDITORIALS.

What's Next?

To assess developments in the Soviet Union we put two questions to Western and Soviet experts. Each question and the responses to it appear below.

1. The collapse of the most authoritarian institutions of the Soviet Union is viewed by Western political figures as a victory and by business leaders as an opportunity. How should the United States relate to these changes and what lessons and opportunities do they provide to democrats (small "d") to effect change at home and abroad?

E.P. THOMPSON

When in history did a revolutionary overthrow of state institutions disclose its possible character and direction within two or three weeks? What used to be the U.S.S.R. is already assuming protean forms, and there will be major political shifts in coming months. In fact, one should not be overconfident about the immediate democratic potential of the republics. Most of the population of Moscow was absent from the resistance to the coup (Leningrad did better), and Yeltsin's strike call was widely ignored. People are looking after themselves, have little democratic experience and many—including many

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"intellectuals"—have the most childish belief in the "market economy" and all the goodies it will miraculously bring into the shops. Of course, the Soviet people are sick of Communist authoritarianism, but they are not out of authoritarian dangers of new kinds. I don't only mean a possible attempt at counterrevolution; I also mean that the present situation of disintegrating political structures and severe economic hardship is a soil from which a new kind of totalitarianism can come, from the executors of the revolution itself.

All this may well be too pessimistic. I may be underestimating the maturity and capacity for regeneration of the Soviet people. They may prove to be rapid learners. But they are going to have to learn a hell of a lot, and not necessarily what Western advisers are keen to teach them. Of course, the United States and its allies should help to see the Soviet Union through the coming winter with generous aid. But this must not come with capitalist strings and advisers—the Soviet Union needs to find its own "Third Way" between private and public. And in general the United States would do well to keep out of Soviet affairs. One way of helping the Soviet people would be for the West to take more rapid steps to reduce its own armaments: It should dissolve NATO and look for structures of common security. Removing the argument of a "Western threat" would take away from any remaining hard-liners and the military one excuse for another coup attempt. Cordial relations between states East and West will be a good thing, with increasing exchanges—political, educational, cultural and so on—but above all we must increase people-to-people exchanges, in which both sides can get a truthful view of how citizens live and think (and, maybe, distrust their own governments) rather than the arrogant one-way transmission of top persons' "know-how." This means strengthening the Helsinki process and the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, which now has a permanent base in Prague.

E.P. Thompson, a British historian and writer, is a founder of European Nuclear Disarmament.

RICHARD J. BARNET

The United States should respond to the welcome recent events in the Soviet Union by making the changes in its policy toward the new Union government that it should have begun in the *perestroika* years. To do much good, though, they must be major changes, and made quickly. Our government should make significant contributions to an international effort to supply the Soviet Union with capital, technology and short-term humanitarian aid. The money should come from the national security budget. Billions spent this way will buy more long-term security than new missiles or other loony projects that still engage the Rip Van Winkles in the national security bureaucracy.

The aid should be given in a way that will not weaken the central Union government, the maintenance of which is critical to U.S. national security. For our own good, and to support the forces of reform in the Soviet Union against the hard-liners who accuse Gorbachev of selling out to the United States, we must begin demobilization of cold war institutions. The Pentagon should come up with a budget based on the cancellation of major new weapons systems, as well as the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Europe and the demobilization of their backup in the United States. Congress should hold hearings on the irrelevance to the disorders of the post-cold war world of much of the U.S. military force. This is the moment to debate whether the United States is to be the sheriff of the post-cold war world and if it is to continue to count on its commercial rivals to finance its deficits.

A matter of great concern is the large stockpile of nuclear weapons in a disintegrating Soviet Union, where the battle for democracy is far from over. The United States should take some dramatic unilateral steps to demonstrate its concern and to signal that it will not take advantage of Soviet vulnerability and dependence. We should announce an end to nuclear weapons production, remove all tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and cut the stockpile of strategic warheads. We should invite the Union authorities to respond, making it clear that their pace of nuclear arms reduction will affect our own as well as the aid we will be prepared to give. Moving fast on the nuclear issue would not only reduce the danger of unauthorized use but could set the stage for a desperately needed international effort to stop and reverse nuclear proliferation.

Richard J. Barnet's latest book is The Rockets' Red Glare *(Simon and Schuster).*

2. It is being said in the Soviet Union and in the United States that as a result of the coup attempt the U.S.S.R. is now a different country, that a decisive turn toward democracy has been taken. Do you agree, and what, in your view, is the single most important issue now facing Soviet reformers?

JOANNE LANDY

The failure of the coup is a great victory for Soviet democracy and opens up the possibility of dismantling the bureaucratic apparatus that has oppressed the Soviet people for decades. But it's too soon to celebrate a decisive turn to democracy. The most important task facing Soviet democrats is consolidating their victory, which is difficult with the economic crisis unresolved. Unfortunately neither Gorbachev, who has repeatedly railed against the Soviet people's "leveling" egalitarianism, nor Yeltsin, with his extreme "free-market" solutions, has a progressive economic program. Moreover, the Soviet democratic left seems weak, for the same reason as in Eastern Europe—the tragic identification of democratic socialist and cooperativist ideas with the ugly reality of bureaucratic Communism.

The hope is, though, that as people in the U.S.S.R. experience "really existing capitalism," with its harsh, unequal austerity dictated by Western institutions, many will come to a radical democratic politics that not only institutionalizes popular political control but also provides the economic underpinnings for democracy. But the Philippine experience shows that a single failed coup attempt is not necessarily the final one if old structures of power and privilege remain. Future hard-line attacks are possible in Moscow if the bureaucracy's

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base is left intact. Gorbachev's reforms, while presented as a way to save the system, created space for independent grassroots activity. Indeed, the new forces unleashed went far beyond the limits he envisioned in 1985. Yet the results of Gorbachev's protection of the apparatus, including appointing coupsters to the highest positions, warn of the continuing dangers of accommodating old-line power.

It is crucial that Soviet reformers respect democratic principles. To move forward they must dismantle the party-state by punishing the coup plotters and stripping the Communist Party of its illegitimately acquired posts. But individuals must have freedom of expression whatever their views, and the C.P. must be able to become a genuine political party. Reformers need to guarantee press freedoms, even for those who favored the coup (though people responsible for implementing the coup should face criminal charges). Reformers also must promote media pluralism, which includes ending the C.P.'s disproportionate control of media resources.

Finally, reformers who want to consolidate democratic gains must allow the breakup of the existing Russian-dominated "Union"—actually an internal empire—or, to use Lenin's still-apt phrase, "a prison-house of peoples." Some republics may elect new forms of association, but from a position of independent choice. There are authoritarian and intolerant tendencies within many republics, but these tendencies can be defeated only by democratic movements in the republics, with solidarity from their neighbors and the international community. Democracy cannot be imposed by a central power that has been correctly perceived as autocratic and Russian-controlled; attempting to force the republics to stay within the U.S.S.R. will help produce exactly the opposite result.

Joanne Landy is director of the New York–based Campaign for Peace and Democracy.

BORIS KAGARLITSKY

Nothing is more naïve than the assertion that we have become "a different country" since August 21. The events of recent weeks attest to the fact that little has changed. New structures of power were already in place, and the Communist Party had long ago become a political corpse—a mere hindrance to those with power.

The Western press, in representing Boris Yeltsin's seizure of power as a triumph of democracy, must bear a large share of the responsibility for what has happened. The press bureaus of the Western newspapers in Moscow practically turned into propaganda departments for the "Moscow White House."

The party deserved its fate, but a precedent has been created that will be used against any opposition. The C.P. is to be followed into oblivion by the soviets, which helped Yeltsin take power. Edict 96, issued by Yeltsin on August 28, revokes the authority of the Moscow soviet in matters of the budget, taxes, the municipal militia and property rights. This edict negates the law of local self-government adopted by the Russian Parliament.

The country is in the throes of an epidemic of denunciations the like of which has not been seen since Stalin's time. The people are confused. Even the intellectuals, who helped Yeltsin take power, are uncomfortable.

The immediate challenge for the Gorbachev-Yeltsin ruling group is not to lose respectability, which would prepare the way for more serious repression. Without that respectability it will be impossible to implement the social program of the new authorities, which will cause mass unemployment, a decline in the standard of living and the curtailment of production.

The events of recent months have demonstrated not only how little prepared Russia is for democracy but also how little we deserve it. The people, who allow themselves to be manipulated and who permit the very first scoundrel politician not only to seize power but to pass himself off as a national hero, are unworthy of freedom. They will be worthy only when, horrified by what has happened, they feel ashamed of their role in events. We will not have to wait long for that, but, most likely, when it happens it will be too late.

Boris Kagarlitsky is a leader of the socialist reform movement in the Soviet Union.

ALEKSANDR TSIPKO

As a result of the unsuccessful coup, the main opponents of democratic changes in the country have been removed from power and a unique opportunity for the decisive dismantling of totalitarian structures, especially the K.G.B., has emerged. But millions of people, the overwhelming majority of society, were indifferent toward the coup. Had the conspirators been able to hold out and to throw enough food into the markets, the people would have reconciled themselves quite rapidly to the new conservative government. They are, for the most part, weary of politics and politicians; they are on the edge of despair. Only an enterprising minority supports the restoration of capitalism and the market economy that has begun in this country. For the time being, democracy is adhered to only on the authority of Boris Yeltsin and out of hatred for the Communists. The moment the democrats take responsibility for economic conditions, the situation could change fundamentally.

Communism died in our country, but the basis for a new antidemocratic coup was preserved. At least four factors could promote destabilization.

§ The deepening of the economic crisis and the impending hungry winter, producing an increase in unemployment—and despair—among the people, who are without their familiar social guarantees or any economic or social prospects.

§ A new wave of "patriotic" criticism of Yeltsin and the whole democratic movement, following the further breakdown of the country.

§ The final departure of the Ukraine from the Soviet Union, giving impetus to centrifugal tendencies within the Russian Republic. Instability in the Tatar region and the northern Caucasus with dire consequences is conceivable under these conditions. The birth of a new imperialism could occur—a democratic imperialism this time.

§ The duocentrism that has emerged in Moscow as a result

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MINORITY REPORT.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

Jerusalem

Take the road from Jerusalem to Ramallah by way of Beit Hanina and you can see the trouble that has been taken by Israeli authorities to make Eastern Europeans feel at home. In the vast settlement belt of Pisgat Ze'ev, uniform blocks of soulless accommodation sit astride the highways and the high ground. Because their purpose is both to encircle and to dominate Arab East Jerusalem, they make few concessions to the aesthetic. ("Architecture," remarked Israel Shahak in this connection, "is the most revealing of the arts.") On one neighboring hill stands an unfinished palace, intended until June 1967 for the occupancy of King Hussein and now a mute witness to the fate of the "Jordanian option." Every other piece of relief in the landscape is encumbered either by the masts and towers of the Israeli Defense Force Central Command, or by General Sharon's Ministry of "Housing," or by the Ministry of Police. Built on confiscated land, and hastened forward in the intervals between James Baker's safari visits, the latest blocks await the arrival of further Muscovites and Leningraders.

Another revealing piece of architecture can be found several miles away in a building named Textile House in Tel Aviv. Here on the fifteenth floor, protected by steel gates and armed Israeli border guards, is the Soviet Consulate. It is besieged for three days each week by recent Jewish immigrants who wish to return home. "From the outside," wrote Maya Bahir in the conservative *Yediot Aharonot*, "the Consulate looks like a war room in the Military Command." The article goes on the quote Sergei Isakov, Soviet vice consul, as saying that "thirty percent of the recent immigrants want to return to the U.S.S.R. I heard it from a top-level official of the Jewish Agency." Even on the day following the coup in Moscow, according to a rather constrained account in *The Jerusalem Post*, the flight leaving Tel Aviv for Moscow carried many returning Jews. (The Israeli radio was also at somewhat of a loss in its initial diminuendo coverage of the death of Ilya Krichevsky, the young Jew murdered by anticonstitutional mutineers outside the Russian Parliament. While senior Israelis called for all Jews to quit Russia at once, the Kaddish was broadcast over Moscow loudspeakers for the first time in history and, despite rabbinical grumblings, Krichevsky's family elected to bury him with his comrades in a joint ecumenical ceremony.)

Western discussion of Soviet Jewish emigration invariably overlooks the fact that, by a surreptitious agreement between the Shamir government and the Soviet bureaucracy, Jews leaving the Soviet Union for Israel are automatically deprived of their Soviet citizenship. Compare this with the situation of a French or American Jew venturing the same course. Soviet Jews, furthermore, are given exit visas only for Israel, and strenuous efforts are made to insure that their transit to the Holy Land is a "direct" one. The governments of Finland and Czechoslovakia, which agreed to provide transit points on condition that Jews would be free to decide their next destination, were told by Israeli authorities "Thanks but no thanks." Another Israeli regulation stipulates that new arrivals who receive financial help from the Jewish Agency are ineligible for passports until they have repaid the debt in full. By these and other means, Soviet Jewish families wishing to make a new life in the United States or Western Europe are obstructed, by official Israel, from doing so. For them, Pisgat Ze'ev awaits—and many of them take up residence there as sullenly as the former, evicted inhabitants of the land, who now live as best they can in actual or internal exile.

When the British used "Red Indian" mercenaries against the American colonists in 1776, provoking a howl of racist resentment that appears in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, Tom Paine argued that the tribes were victims just as much as the rebels and accused George III of "dealing meanly by them and unjustly by us." It is unedifying in rather the same way to see two oppressed groups—Soviet Jews and Palestinian Arabs—set so calculatedly against each other as a matter of state policy. The United States, which happens to be the financier of both the Soviet *aliyah* and the West Bank settlements, cuts a pharisaic figure when it affects a pained neutrality on the question and tries to pose as a disinterested "peacemaker."

Since the beginning of March, with the gulf war ostensibly "over" and Baker airborne with his "peace process," more than 35,000 acres of Palestinian land have been confiscated. In addition, those Palestinians living under occupation have been instructed that they do not have the right to choose their own team of representatives, a negotiating condition hitherto unprecedented. On their return from a preparatory meeting in London, two civic leaders, Faisal Husseini and Hanan Ashrawi, were summoned for interrogation on suspicion of having "met with the P.L.O." (You can't live on the West Bank without doing *that* every day.) Knesset member Yossi Sarid, much quoted during the gulf war for saying that the Palestinians had let him down, commented acidly that, having for years demanded a local substitute for Arafat, Shamir and Sharon were now demanding a substitute for Faisal Husseini.

A third architectural feature here obtrudes itself: the heavily guarded private home established by General Sharon in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. It stands, with its detail of soldiers, as a warning that the evictions and demolitions carried out to expand Rabbi Goren's Wailing Wall plaza are only the beginning. The Israeli government now says that no residents of East Jerusalem are to be allowed to sit at any negotiating table. It does not apply that restriction to the hero of Sabra and Shatila. And the Bush Administration can find nothing to say about the fantastic presumption of one such party vetoing the possible delegation of another.

Of course, every complacent liberal knows how to condemn the Palestinians, who have benefited neither from *perestroika* nor from the New World Order, for their lapses in taste and judgment. The preferred expression is that they keep "missing their opportunities." It's sometimes hard to remember just what those "opportunities" are supposed to be.

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WATCHING RIGHTS.

ARYEH NEIER

Great events, like those in the Soviet Union, have a way of obliterating other matters that seemed all-important until moments before. Only half a year has passed since the gulf war consumed our attention. Now it seems diminished and remote. Yet millions continue to suffer the war's consequences. The prospect that they will obtain relief has dimmed along with the passing of the spotlight of world attention.

A partial list of those still suffering from Saddam Hussein's callous stupidity and the overwhelming onslaught by the United States and its allies includes: thousands of Iraqi civilians dying from disease and malnutrition because of the combined effects of the bombing and the continuing sanctions; hundreds of thousands of Shiites and Kurds eking out an existence, and some of them dying, in displacement or exile as a result of their abortive revolts against Saddam and his savage reprisals; and the families of tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers whose bodies were bulldozed into the sand by allied forces in violation of Geneva Convention requirements that they be identified, the cause of death established, their interment conducted honorably and according to their religion, their graves marked and information provided to their families so as to permit exhumation and reburial.

Another large category of continuing victims constituted a significant part of the population of Kuwait prior to the Iraqi invasion. Following the liberation, there was a flurry of attention to some of the more flagrant Kuwaiti abuses against Palestinians and others accused—generally on the basis of little or no evidence—of collaborating with the Iraqis or merely sympathizing with them. Yasir Arafat's well-publicized embrace of Saddam Hussein cost his people dearly, not only in the Israeli-occupied territories but throughout the Palestinian diaspora. When the Kuwaiti government commuted the death sentences imposed upon some accused of collaboration, interest in Kuwaiti justice abated.

My colleagues at Middle East Watch have now published a detailed account of the developments in Kuwait in the past six months. Titled "A Victory Turned Sour: Human Rights in Kuwait Since Liberation," it documents what would be called "death squad" killings if they had taken place in Central America, disappearances, clandestine burials, torture, rape in detention, prolonged incommunicado detention, horrifying conditions of imprisonment and farcical trials.

Of about 5,800 persons detained since liberation, at least 3,000 remain in detention today. Just one of the scores of cases described in Middle East Watch's report indicates the barbarity of post-liberation Kuwait:

> Khalil Bahoor, a Palestinian director of Umm al-Haiman Secondary School, was arrested in late March or early April. On April 10, his wife was informed by the Abu Helaifa Police Station that he was very sick and had been taken to al-Addan Hospital. At the hospital, when his relatives were permitted to see him, they found that he had been dead for some 10 days, having been killed by a sharp weapon, and his nose and ears had been amputated. Middle East Watch was told that his death certificate, signed by a Kuwaiti doctor and nurse, said that he had died of a heart attack and kidney failure on April 5.

In addition to those who were detained, a much larger number of Palestinians and others who resided in Kuwait have been expelled or barred from returning to the country. More than 1,500 residents have been summarily deported. Among them are former detainees who were cleared of charges without ever being brought to trial, and even some who were acquitted by the martial law courts. The deportees include Bedoons (people who were born in Kuwait and lived there all their life but who are officially stateless, generally because a male ancestor neglected to obtain Kuwaiti citizenship). At least another several thousand Bedoons are stranded outside Kuwait and are not being allowed to return. As for Palestinians, about 180,000—roughly half the number who resided in Kuwait before the invasion—fled during the Iraqi occupation. Although their flight is a good indication that they were not collaborators, they have not been permitted to return.

As should be obvious, if the United States were to denounce Kuwait's abuses publicly, the effect would be significant. Moreover, having whipped up support for the war by recounting horror stories about Iraqi atrocities against Kuwaitis—some real, others imaginary—the Bush Administration hardly distinguishes itself by ignoring abuses by the Kuwaitis. Yet the Administration has done worse: President Bush himself has served as the foremost apologist for the perpetrators. At a July 1 press conference he said, "The war wasn't fought about democracy in Kuwait. The war was fought about aggression against Kuwait. . . . I think we're expecting a little much if we're asking the people in Kuwait to take kindly to those that had spied on their countrymen that were left there, that had brutalized families there and things of that nature." This undercut even the mild criticism by the U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait, Edward Gnehm, who three weeks earlier said in a speech to the Kuwaiti Chamber of Commerce: "Those who broke Kuwaiti laws and were parties to Iraqi criminal actions should be prosecuted fairly and fully under the law. But the innocent should not become new victims." Bush's remarks were featured on the front page of the Kuwait government daily under the headline: "Bush declares his understanding of Kuwaitis' attitude toward collaborators: 'We would be asking a lot if we asked them to show mercy,' he says."

In its time the gulf war deflected attention from the leftover victims of previous events; it was no accident, for instance, that China chose that moment to try the most prominent of the dissenters it had imprisoned twenty months earlier for the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. It is the misfortune of two of those who received among the harshest prison terms, Wang Juntao and Chen Ziming, each sentenced to thirteen years, that they chose to begin a hunger strike to protest their execrable conditions of confinement just as all eyes focused on the earthshaking events in the Soviet Union. For the victims in China, in Kuwait and everywhere else, the only hope lies in world concern with their plight. These are tough times to sustain that concern.

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ARTICLES.

WHY WE READ

Canon to the Right of Me . . .

KATHA POLLITT

For the past couple of years we've all been witness to a furious debate about the literary canon. What books should be assigned to students? What books should critics discuss? What books should the rest of us read, and who are "we" anyway? Like everyone else, I've given these questions some thought, and when an invitation came my way, I leaped to produce my own manifesto. But to my surprise, when I sat down to write—in order to discover, as E.M. Forster once said, what I really think—I found that I agreed with all sides in the debate at once.

Take the conservatives. Now, this rather dour collection of scholars and diatribists—Allan Bloom, Hilton Kramer, John Silber and so on—are not a particularly appealing group of people. They are arrogant, they are rude, they are gloomy, they do not suffer fools gladly, and everywhere they look, fools are what they see. All good reasons not to elect them to public office, as the voters of Massachusetts recently decided. But what is so terrible, really, about what they are saying? I too believe that some books are more profound, more complex, more essential to an understanding of our culture than others; I too am appalled to think of students graduating from college not having read Homer, Plato, Virgil, Milton, Tolstoy—all writers, dead white Western men though they be, whose works have meant a great deal to me. As a teacher of literature and of writing, I too have seen at first hand how ill-educated many students are, and how little aware they are of this important fact about themselves. Last year I taught a graduate seminar in the writing of poetry. None of my students had read more than a smattering of poems by anyone, male or female, published more than ten years ago. Robert Lowell was as far outside their frame of reference as Alexander Pope. When I gently suggested to one student that it might benefit her to read some poetry if she planned to spend her life writing it, she told me that yes, she knew she should read more but when she encountered a really good poem it only made her depressed. That contemporary writing has a history which it profits us to know in some depth, that we ourselves were not born yesterday, seems too obvious even to argue.

But ah, say the liberals, the canon exalted by the conservatives is itself an artifact of history. Sure, some books are more rewarding than others, but why can't we change our minds about which books those are? The canon itself was not always as we know it today: Until the 1920s, *Moby-Dick* was shelved with the boys' adventure stories. If T.S. Eliot could singlehandedly dethrone the Romantic poets in favor of the neglected Metaphysicals and place John Webster alongside Shakespeare, why can't we dip into the sea of stories and fish out Edith Wharton or Virginia Woolf? And this position too makes a great deal of sense to me. After all, alongside the many good reasons for a book to end up on the required-reading shelf are some rather suspect reasons for its exclusion: because it was written by a woman and therefore presumed to be too slight; because it was written by a black person and therefore presumed to be too unsophisticated or to reflect too special a case. By all means, say the liberals, let's have great books and a shared culture. But let's make sure that all the different kinds of greatness are represented and that the culture we share reflects the true range of human experience.

If we leave the broadening of the canon up to the conservatives, this will never happen, because to them change only means defeat. Look at the recent fuss over the latest edition of the Great Books series published by Encyclopedia Britannica, headed by that old snake-oil salesman Mortimer Adler. Four women have now been added to the series: Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Jane Austen and George Eliot. That's nice, I suppose, but really! Jane Austen has been a certified Great Writer for a hundred years! Lionel Trilling said so! There's something truly absurd about the conservatives earnestly sitting in judgment on the illustrious dead, as though up in Writers' Heaven Jane and George and Willa and Virginia were breathlessly waiting to hear if they'd finally made it into the club, while Henry Fielding, newly dropped from the list, howls in outer darkness and the Brontës, presumably, stamp their feet in frustration and hope for better luck in twenty years, when *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* will suddenly turn out to have qualities of greatness never before detected in their pages. It's like Poets' Corner at Manhattan's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where mortal men—and a woman or two—of letters actually vote on which immortals to honor with a plaque, a process no doubt complete with electoral campaigns, compromise candidates and all the rest of the underside of the literary life. "No, I'm sorry, I just can't vote for Whitman. I'm a Washington Irving man myself."

Well, a liberal is not a very exciting thing to be, as *Nation* readers know, and so we have the radicals, who attack the concepts of "greatness," "shared," "culture" and "lists." (I'm overlooking here the ultraradicals, who attack the "privileging" of "texts," as they insist on calling books, and think one might as well spend one's college years deconstructing *Leave It to Beaver*.) Who is to say, ask the radicals, what is a great book? What's so terrific about complexity, ambiguity, historical centrality and high seriousness? If *The Color Purple*, say, gets students thinking about their own experience, maybe they ought to read it and forget about——and here you can fill in the name of whatever classic work you yourself found dry and tedious and never got around to finishing. For the radicals the notion of a shared culture is a lie, because it means presenting as universally meaningful and politically neutral books that reflect the interests and experi-

Katha Pollitt was a participant in the Columbia University Center for American Culture Studies' panel discussion on "The Politics of Culture," from which this essay is adapted.

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ences and values of privileged white men at the expense of those of others—women, blacks, Latinos, Asians, the working class, whoever. Why not scrap the one-list-for-everyone idea and let people connect with books that are written by people like themselves about people like themselves? It will be a more accurate reflection of a multifaceted and conflict-ridden society, and will do wonders for everyone's self-esteem, except, of course, living white men—but they have too much self-esteem already.

Now, I have to say that I dislike the radicals' vision intensely. How foolish to argue that Chekhov has nothing to say to a black woman—or, for that matter, myself—merely because he is Russian, long dead, a man. The notion that one reads to increase one's self-esteem sounds to me like more snake oil. Literature is not an aerobics class or a session at the therapist's. But then I think of myself as a child, leafing through anthologies of poetry for the names of women. I never would have admitted that I needed a role model, even if that awful term had existed back in the prehistory of which I speak, but why was I so excited to find a female name, even when, as was often the case, it was attached to a poem of no interest to me whatsoever? Anna Laetitia Barbauld, author of "Life! I know not what thou art/But know that thou and I must part!"; Lady Anne Lindsay, writer of languid ballads in incomprehensible Scots dialect; and the other minor female poets included by chivalrous Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in the old *Oxford Book of English Verse*: I have to admit it, just by their presence in that august volume they did something for me. And although it had nothing to do with reading or writing, it was an important thing they did.

Now, what are we to make of this spluttering debate, in which charges of imperialism are met by equally passionate accusations of vandalism, in which each side hates the others, and yet each one seems to have its share of reason? Perhaps what we have here is one of those debates in which the opposing sides, unbeknownst to themselves, share a myopia that will turn out to be the most telling feature of the whole discussion: a debate, for instance, like that of our Founding Fathers over the nature of the franchise. Think of all the energy and passion spent pondering the question of property qualifications or direct versus legislative elections while all along, unmentioned and unimagined, was the fact—to us so central—that women and slaves were never considered for any kind of vote.

Something is being overlooked: the state of reading, and books, and literature in our country at this time. Why, ask yourself, is everyone so hot under the collar about what to put on the required-reading shelf? It is because while we have been arguing so fiercely about which books make the best medicine, the patient has been slipping deeper and deeper into a coma.

Let us imagine a country in which reading is a popular voluntary activity. There, parents read books for their own edification and pleasure, and are seen by their children at this silent and mysterious pastime. These parents also read to their children, give them books for presents, talk to them about books and underwrite, with their taxes, a public library system that is open all day, every day. In school—where an attractive library is invariably to be found—the children study certain books together but also have an active reading life of their own. Years later it may even be hard for them to remember if they read *Jane Eyre* at home and Judy Blume in class, or the other way around. In college young people continue to be assigned certain books, but far more important are the books they discover for themselves—browsing in the library, in bookstores, on the shelves of friends, one book leading to another, back and forth in history and across languages and cultures. After graduation they continue to read, and in the fullness of time produce a new generation of readers. Oh happy land! I wish we all lived there.

In that other country of real readers—voluntary, active, self-determined readers—a debate like the current one over the canon would not be taking place. Or if it did, it would be as a kind of parlor game: What books would *you* take to a desert island? Everyone would know that the top-ten list was merely a tiny fraction of the books one would read in a lifetime. It would not seem racist or sexist or hopelessly hidebound to put Hawthorne on the syllabus and not Toni Morrison. It would be more like putting oatmeal and not noodles on the breakfast menu—a choice part arbitrary, part a nod to the national past, part, dare one say it, a kind of reverse affirmative action: School might frankly be the place where one read the books that are a little off-putting, that have gone a little cold, that you might pass over because they do not address, in reader-friendly contemporary fashion, the issues most immediately at stake in modern life, but that, with a little study, turn out to have a great deal to say. Being on the list wouldn't mean so much. It might even add to a writer's cachet *not* to be on the list, to be in one way or another too heady, too daring, too exciting to be ground up into institutional fodder for teenagers. Generations of high school kids have been turned

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off to George Eliot by being forced to read *Silas Marner* at a tender age. One can imagine a whole new readership for her if grown-ups were left to approach *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* with open minds, at their leisure.

Of course, they rarely do. In America today the assumption underlying the canon debate is that the books on the list are the only books that are going to be read, and if the list is dropped no books are going to be read. Becoming a textbook is a book's only chance; all sides take that for granted. And so all agree not to mention certain things that they themselves, as highly educated people and, one assumes, devoted readers, know perfectly well. For example, that if you read only twenty-five, or fifty, or a hundred books, you can't understand them, however well chosen they are. And that if you don't have an independent reading life—and very few students do—you won't *like* reading the books on the list and will forget them the minute you finish them. And that books have, or should have, lives beyond the syllabus—thus, the totally misguided attempt to put current literature in the classroom. How strange to think that people need professorial help to read John Updike or Alice Walker, writers people actually do read for fun. But all sides agree, if it isn't taught, it doesn't count.

Let's look at the canon question from another angle. Instead of asking what books we want others to read, let's ask why we read books ourselves. I think the canon debaters are being a little disingenuous here, are suppressing, in the interest of their own agendas, their personal experience of reading. Sure, we read to understand our American culture and history, and we also read to recover neglected masterpieces, and to learn more about the accomplishments of our subgroup and thereby, as I've admitted about myself, increase our self-esteem. But what about reading for the aesthetic pleasures of language, form, image? What about reading to learn something new, to have a vicarious adventure, to follow the workings of an interesting, if possibly skewed, narrow and ill-tempered mind? What about reading for the story? For an expanded sense of sheer human variety? There are a thousand reasons why a book might have a claim on our time and attention other than its canonization. I once infuriated an acquaintance by asserting that Trollope, although in many ways a lesser writer than Dickens, possessed some wonderful qualities Dickens lacked: a more realistic view of women, a more skeptical view of good intentions, a subtler sense of humor, a drier vision of life which I myself found congenial. You'd think I'd advocated throwing Dickens out and replacing him with a toaster. Because Dickens is a certified Great Writer, and Trollope is not.

Am I saying anything different from what Randall Jarrell said in his great 1953 essay "The Age of Criticism"? Not really, so I'll quote him. Speaking of the literary gatherings of the era, Jarrell wrote:

> If, at such parties, you wanted to talk about *Ulysses* or *The Castle* or *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Great Gatsby* or Graham Greene's last novel—Important books—you were at the right place. (Though you weren't so well off if you wanted to talk about *Remembrance of Things Past*. Important, but too long.) But if you wanted to talk about Turgenev's novelettes, or *The House of the Dead*, or *Lavengro*, or *Life on the Mississippi*, or *The Old Wives' Tale*, or *The Golovlyov Family*, or Cunningham-Grahame's stories, or Saint-Simon's memoirs, or *Lost Illusions*, or *The Beggar's Opera*, or *Eugen Onegin*, or *Little Dorrit*, or the *Burnt Njal Saga*, or *Persuasion*, or *The Inspector-General*, or *Oblomov*, or *Peer Gynt*, or *Far from the Madding Crowd*, or *Out of Africa*, or the *Parallel Lives*, or *A Dreary Story*, or *Debits and Credits*, or *Arabia Deserta*, or *Elective Affinities*, or *Schweik*, or—any of a thousand good or interesting but Unimportant books, you couldn't expect a very ready knowledge or sympathy from most of the readers there. They had looked at the big sights, the current sights, hard, with guides and glasses; and those walks in the country, over unfrequented or thrice-familiar territory, all alone—those walks from which most of the joy and good of reading come—were walks that they hadn't gone on very often.

I suspect that most canon debaters have taken those solitary rambles, if only out of boredom—how many times, after all, can you reread the *Aeneid*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*, or *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (to pick one book from each column)? But those walks don't count, because of another assumption all sides hold in common, which is that the purpose of reading is none of the many varied and delicious satisfactions I've mentioned; it's medicinal. The chief end of reading is to produce a desirable kind of person and a desirable kind of society. A respectful, high-minded citizen of a unified society for the conservatives, an up-to-date and flexible sort for the liberals, a subgroup-identified, robustly confident one for the radicals. How pragmatic, how moralistic, how American! The culture debaters turn out to share a secret suspicion of culture itself, as well as the antipornographer's belief that there is a simple, one-to-one correlation between books and behavior. Read the conservatives' list and produce a nation of sexists and racists—or a nation of philosopher kings. Read the liberals' list and produce a nation of spineless relativists—or a nation of open-minded world citizens. Read the radicals' list and produce a nation of psychobabblers and ancestor-worshipers—or a nation of stalwart proud-to-be-me pluralists.

But is there any list of a few dozen books that can have such a magical effect, for good or for ill? Of course not. It's like arguing that a perfectly nutritional breakfast cereal is enough food for the whole day. And so the canon debate is really an argument about what books to cram down the resistant throats of a resentful captive populace of students; and the

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trick is never to mention the fact that, in such circumstances, one book is as good, or as bad, as another. Because, as the debaters know from their own experience as readers, books are not pills that produce health when ingested in measured doses. Books do not shape character in any simple way—if, indeed, they do so at all—or the most literate would be the most virtuous instead of just the ordinary run of humanity with larger vocabularies. Books cannot mold a common national purpose when, in fact, people are honestly divided about what kind of country they want—and are divided, moreover, for very good and practical reasons, as they always have been.

For these burly and energetic purposes, books are all but useless. The way books affect us is an altogether more subtle, delicate, wayward and individual, not to say private, affair. And that reading is being made to bear such an inappropriate and simplistic burden speaks to the poverty both of culture and of frank political discussion in our time.

On his deathbed, Dr. Johnson—once canonical, now more admired than read—is supposed to have said to a friend who was energetically rearranging his bedclothes, "Thank you, this will do all that a pillow can do." One might say that the canon debaters are all asking of their handful of chosen books that they do a great deal more than any handful of books can do. □

BLACKS AND JEWS

Different Kinds Of Survival

LETTY COTTIN POGREBIN

According to a Yankelovich poll, in the last quarter-century anti-Semitism has declined among whites but increased among blacks. Today blacks are twice as likely as whites to hold significant anti-Semitic attitudes and, even more alarming, it is younger and better-educated blacks who tend to be the most bigoted. By the same token, although a 1990 poll done by the National Opinion Research Center found that Jews have more positive attitudes toward blacks and a greater commitment to equal opportunity than do other white Americans, the poll also found that a majority of Jews do not favor government help or government spending to benefit blacks. Worse still, a Harris poll found that Jews are more likely than other whites to be upset if blacks move into their neighborhood; and 20 percent of Jews said they did not want their children to attend school with blacks, as compared with only 14 percent of other whites.

In light of the recent controversy over Professor Leonard Jeffries's views and the continuing confrontation between African-Americans and Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn's Crown Heights section, it's fair to say that black-Jewish relations are at one of their periodic flashpoints. No longer can blacks and Jews be drawn together simply because other Americans hate us both. No longer can we expect each other to agree on what constitutes racism, anti-Semitism or institutional barriers to equal opportunity. No longer can a single speech or slogan move us to march together. Now we often march in opposite directions or face each other across an abyss. Now our two communities clash regularly over issues of power, priorities, competitive oppression and conflicting self-interest. Now it takes arguing, negotiating and struggling to find common ground within our changed circumstances and new suspicions. Now I know that black-Jewish coalition building takes work and leaves scars.

During the 1984 presidential campaign, when Jesse Jackson was excoriated for his "Hymietown" statement and full-page ads appeared from an organization called "Jews Against Jackson," the growing enmity between our two communities reached a boiling point. In response, several black-Jewish dialogues were started. One of them was a consciousness-raising-type group composed of three blacks and three Jews, founded by Harriet Michel, then president of the New York Urban League, and myself. That group is still meeting regularly. Also in 1984, I helped to form a thirty-member black-Jewish women's group whose purpose was to prepare our two communities to play a constructive role at the Nairobi United Nations Conference on Women. Although it continued meeting after the conference was over, this group petered out within two years. At first, I attributed its failure to waning black interest.

"Why do you think so many black women stopped coming to our dialogue meetings even though we started out with an equal representation?" I asked a black friend who had been part of the group.

"You Jews have to stop acting like God's chosen people," she barked, her eyes hard and angry. "The world doesn't revolve around you. Relations with Jews are not a priority for most African-Americans; our main concern is *survival*."

The differences between blacks and Jews are rarely more obvious than when each group speaks about its own "survival," a word that both use frequently but with quite dissimilar meanings. For blacks, survival means actual physical endurance, staying alive in the face of violent crime, drugs, hunger, homelessness, and infant mortality rates that are more than triple those of whites; it means surviving as a viable community when 30 percent of the adults and 75 percent of the young live in poverty, when 44 percent of black 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate and black unemployment is twice the white rate. For Jews, survival means keeping a minority culture and a religion alive against all odds, guarding against anti-Semitism and the slippery slope that could lead from hate speech to the gas chambers, and helping to guarantee the security of Israel.

In other words, blacks worry about their actual conditions and fear for the present; Jews worry about their history and fear for the future. Black survival is threatened by poverty; Jewish survival is threatened by affluence (with its temptation of intermarriage with the more privileged majority), assimilation and moral corruption. Racism is a bacterium,

Letty Cottin Pogrebin is a founding editor of Ms. *This article is adapted from her new book,* Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America *(Crown).*

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potentially curable but now deadly; anti-Semitism is a virus, potentially deadly but currently contained.

"In America, though permitted to be rich, Jews are not permitted to be comfortable," asserts writer Leonard Fein. When those who make us uncomfortable are black—for instance, Spike Lee, whose film *Mo' Better Blues* included the gratuitously stereotyped nightclub owners Joe and Josh Flatbush; or the rap group Public Enemy, whose best-selling record called Jews "Christ killers" and whose "Minister of Information," Professor Griff, said, "Jews are responsible for the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe"; or talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, who benignly accepted the claim of a guest that Jews murder children for religious ritual; or Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu, who lectured Jews on forgiving the Nazis for the murder of the Six Million—we Jews somehow feel more threatened and betrayed, expecting better from our former allies. The color of the perpetrator does not determine the degree of our safety, only the degree of our surprise.

A totally assimilated Jewish friend of mine says he can never relax as long as a swastika is painted on even one wall in America. I have a recurrent dream in which my children and I are being herded into cattle cars en route to Auschwitz. Every Jew remembers that our people were powerful and well-off in the 1930s in Berlin and Prague and Warsaw, but their prosperity didn't save them. We remember how quickly Jews and Israel were scapegoated in the United States during the gas shortages of the 1970s and the farm crisis of the 1980s. We notice that no matter how few we are, Jews are blamed for the slightest economic reversal in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and France. In 1991, we heard whispers that the war in the Persian Gulf was the fault of the Jews. So, regardless of what we have accomplished in life we continue to fear the swastika and smell the smoke. In fact, the more we flourish, the surer we are that the anti-Semites are out there begrudging our success. As the old joke would have it, paranoids have enemies too.

My cattle-car dream takes me unawares every few years, like a dormant parasite that eats away at the intestines with no apparent provocation. I have toured the Dachau concentration camp near Munich, but that was long before I had children. I lost relatives to the Nazis, but my own immediate family, spawned in the 1960s, has never been in danger. Still, I dream that dream. I tell this to my black friend with the angry eyes. I want her to remember that in her lifetime and mine, one out of every three Jews in the world was slaughtered. "Even if never personally threatened, you would need constant reassurance if one-third of your relatives had been murdered," I tell her.

My friend listens but she still doesn't get it. She grew up in a neighborhood where Jews collected the rent, ran the shops, employed black domestic workers, checked up on welfare clients and taught black children. She works now in New York City, where every Jew she sees is thriving. She points out that 30 million American blacks have only twenty-six Congressional representatives and no black senators, while 6 million American Jews have thirty-three Jewish members of the House and eight Jewish senators. Through her eyes I see how

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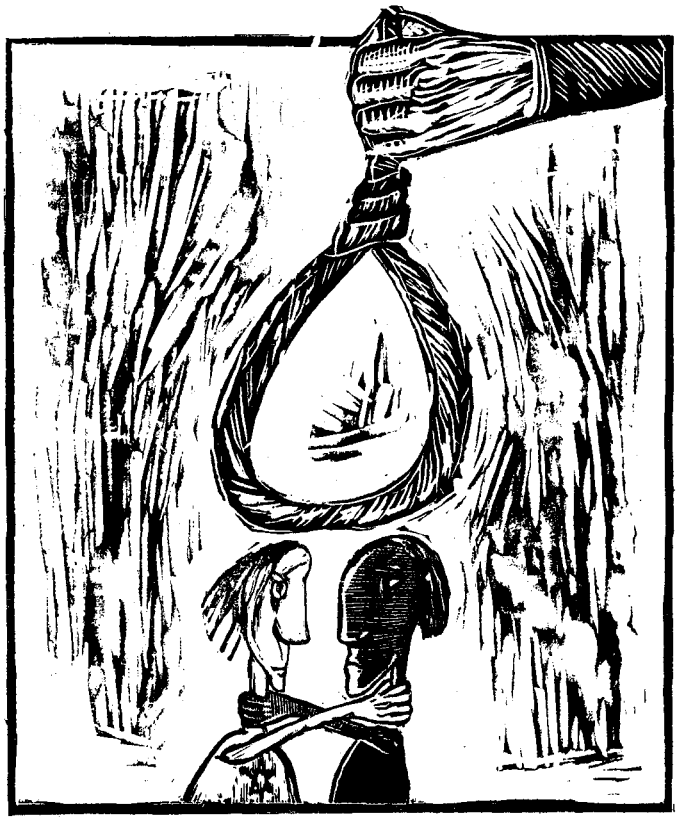
it might seem unbelievable that a people so affluent, powerful and *white* could possibly be quaking at the summit.

How very differently our two out-groups view the world. To blacks, America is the nation that enslaved them and continues to deny them opportunities. To Jews, it is a promised land that made good on its promises. Blacks worry that their (bad) situation will never improve—therefore their issues are fundamental issues like affordable housing, better education and affirmative action. Jews worry that our (good) situation will not last—therefore our issues are safety issues like freedom of religion (separation of church and state), freedom of immigration (Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews) and a secure Israel. To summarize these complex differences in an oversimplified statement, African-Americans need relief in the form of practical economic assistance; Jews need relief in the form of normalized group and individual acceptance.

Assistance. Acceptance. Clearly these needs are not comparable, but they can be experienced with comparable intensity and they can lead people to the same place. Thus, blacks enter into dialogue in the hope it will result in action to address their needs, while for Jews, dialogue *is* the need: If blacks are still talking to us, we think, maybe the liberal alliance is not dead, maybe we don't have to stand alone, maybe we can feel a little safer in America.

Dialogue has taught me that each group inaccurately perceives the negative power of the other. Blacks are not really in a position to hurt Jews, but because of their superior numbers and a few high-profile anti-Semites, Jews fear them. Jews are not really in a position to hurt blacks, but blacks believe we are determined to keep them down. African-Americans are saying, If we're supposed to be brothers and sisters, how come you're doing so well and we're in the streets? Jews are saying, If we're supposed to be friends, how come you keep picking on us?



Maybe Jews and blacks lock horns more than other groups because we are the only ones who take each other seriously, the only minority groups who still seem to believe that our destinies are interwoven. (There are innumerable Jewish-black dialogues, but where are the Italian-black or Irish-black conclaves?) Or maybe we are encouraged to fight in public as surrogate combatants for the bigots in the dominant culture. As the media magnify every black-Jewish clash, other Americans can let off steam vicariously while avoiding the anger that might otherwise be directed at them. Meanwhile, blacks and Jews get hooked on the oldest scam in the world: divide and conquer.

I refuse to let that happen. While I had been hurt by my friend's angry words, talking with her clarified that I was the one who had not understood. I had suggested that there was something wrong with African-Americans for dropping out of the dialogue, when in fact there was something wrong with the dialogue for failing to serve the needs of its black participants. Because the Jewish agenda—creating alliances—was being fulfilled, Jews kept showing up at the meetings. But the black agenda—cooperative activism—had stalled, so some black women had stopped coming. It was as simple as that. Beneath her fury, my friend was really saying, "Stop complaining. Your needs are being met and mine are not." She saw Jews getting what they craved (acceptance), while what blacks craved (assistance) wasn't forthcoming.

Given their survival emergencies, the African-Americans in many of these dialogue groups have become impatient with the Jewish need for feel-good talk about the old civil rights alliance. Our African-American dialogue partners want to be seen as equals. They want to focus on today's realities. They want us to regard the underclass as a human problem, not a black problem, and black advancement as a moral imperative, not a quid pro quo for black-Jewish friendship. They want us to stop telling them what we have in common and to start listening to black assessments of our differences. They want us to use our political and economic power to get some action.

Blacks are asking Jews to go beyond tension reduction into practical, nitty-gritty activism and advocacy work. They want biracial teams to organize and lobby for economic and social programs in the areas of affordable housing, child care, health, dropout prevention, education and drug treatment. They want us to mount joint press conferences, petition campaigns, conferences, demonstrations, vigils and fact-finding trips. They want public education projects, guest columns in each other's newspapers, pulpit exchanges in each other's churches and synagogues, black-Jewish pairs speaking in the schools, Jewish intellectuals promoting books by and about African-Americans, career internships for black students. They expect us to work together monitoring police prejudice, hate crimes, media distortions, vandalism, harassment. They want Jews to "interrupt" racism whenever we see or hear it. And they want financial support for black self-reliance projects—they want white resources put into programs that African-Americans control.

African-Americans may not realize it, but what they are asking Jews to do, in my opinion, is to *act Jewish*. How we each practice religious Judaism is a private matter, but the

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Christopher Lasch on Religion: Illusion, or Antidote to Illusion?

The modern temper — as seen in Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and others — confidently assumes that the experience of religious doubt, moral relativism, and disenchantment is the natural product of our critical reason and maturity. Actually, this sense of undaunted disillusionment is modernity's characteristic form of pride.

Modernity treats religion as a source of intellectual and emotional security, rather than as a challenge to complacency and pride. Religion's ethical teachings are misconstrued as a body of simple commandments leaving no room for ambiguity.

The wonderful machines that science has enabled us to construct have made it possible to imagine ourselves as masters of our fate. In an age that fancies itself as disillusioned, the illusion of mastery, of independence from powers beyond our control, remains as tenacious as ever. But now that we're beginning to grasp the limits of our control over the natural world, this illusion's future is very much in doubt, more problematical, certainly, than the future of religion. Indeed, it is this most important of illusions which religion asks us to renounce.

— adapted from the NEW OXFORD REVIEW

Christopher Lasch is a frequent contributor to the NEW OXFORD REVIEW; his comments above say much about the perspective of the REVIEW. Edited by lay Catholics, we're an ecumenical monthly magazine spearheading the renewed interest in religion among intellectuals and addressing the significant puzzles in life: evil, goodness, suffering, love, death, and the meaning of it all.

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practice of moral Judaism is something I believe most Jews must express publicly through our commitments.

To be morally Jewish requires doing *tzedakah* (the Hebrew word meaning charity, caring and "right action," whose linguistic root, *tzedek*, means justice) and *gemilut hesed* (acts of lovingkindness). These are actions, not just talk. The pursuit of justice is one definition of activism. It is also, as I've said, what makes and keeps us Jews. If we lose our purpose, we lose our peoplehood and become no more than an odd collection of folks with common ancestors, unique religious laws and an uncanny potential for victimization. That's not Jewish enough for me. □

THE CHARACTER ISSUE

Good Reasons for Doubting Thomas

BRUCE SHAPIRO

It's not hard to find reasons to oppose the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas. There's far more than his rejection of affirmative action: Thomas has attacked the right to privacy expressed in the crucial 1965 Court ruling legalizing birth control, assailed the minimum wage, blocked age-discrimination claims by older Americans and praised an antiabortion tract. And as even the American Bar Association found, Thomas, whose Senate confirmation hearings begin September 10, is among the more scantily qualified Supreme Court candidates in recent memory.

Yet even with one civil rights group after another lining up against Thomas, uneasy politicians and activists wonder whether the nomination is worth vigorous opposition. Don't waste political capital on a lost cause, runs the argument; the balance of power on the Court has already shifted. But a close look at the recently concluded Supreme Court term suggests otherwise: Thomas, with his distinct political obsessions, poses a special threat. For despite the new conservative majority, civil rights advocates and women won several important victories, by narrow margins, on the specific grounds of race and sex discrimination—the very arena of Thomas's most clearly articulated right-wing views. In a crucial victory for working women, for instance, the Court held 5 to 4 that "fetal protection" rules barring women from a workplace amount to unconstitutional discrimination. Thomas's extreme views on civil rights law and government intervention in the economy would likely have tipped the balance the other way.

Some observers portray Thomas as an uneasy iconoclast as likely to be wooed to the left as to the right. Thomas's biography suggests otherwise; the past decade of his career brought ever-deeper entrenchment on the conservative fringe. Walter Robinson reports in the July 26 *Boston Globe* that, as newly appointed chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1982 and 1983, Thomas still defended some affirmative action policies and fought a Justice Department attempt to rescind minority-hiring timetables for private employers. But starting in 1984 Thomas opposed all affirmative action philosophically and blocked enforcement of the law in practice. "I believe firmly that I should have taken a more aggressive stand" against affirmative action in earlier years, he told the Heritage Foundation in 1987. Through the 1980s his speeches took on an ever-wider range of issues involving minorities, women, working people and the economy. And he uttered increasingly loopy statements of political philosophy: "Commerce, along with sports, teaches us the conditions of freedom."

Some senators may finally be moved to oppose Thomas not just because of his ideology but because of his dubious commitment to professional ethics. The question makes the White House nervous. After Supreme Court Watch revealed in mid-July that Judge Thomas improperly helped overturn a $10.4 million damage award against Ralston Purina, owned largely by Thomas patron Senator John Danforth and his family, White House counsel C. Boyden Gray rushed to commission a report defending Thomas's conduct. Ralston Purina isn't the only case in which Judge Thomas ignored what the public might perceive to be a conflict of interest. After lavishly praising Oliver North's resistance to the Congressional Iran/*contra* inquiry in 1987 and 1988, in 1990 Thomas sat on the panel that heard the appeal of North's criminal conviction. One of Thomas's colleagues on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, Judge Abner Mikva, disqualified himself from the North case because while still a member of Congress Mikva had voted to establish the Iran/*contra* special prosecutor. Considered together with Purina, Thomas's participation in the North case, especially in light of Mikva's example, suggests a grave insensitivity to public perceptions of credibility.

Thomas's career shows that he has been willing to skirt the edges of legality and truth time and again. In 1986 he promised Congress more aggressive enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, but he continued to sandbag affirmative action at the E.E.O.C. In 1988 the Senate Select Committee on Aging found that Thomas had "misled" Congress and the public when he allowed 13,000 age-discrimination cases pending at the E.E.O.C. to lapse; a federal judge called Thomas's actions in one E.E.O.C. case "at best . . . slothful, at worst deceptive to the public." In the now-famous matter of his hard-working sister, Emma Mae Martin of Pinpoint, Georgia, Thomas was willing for the sake of a political point to misrepresent her as a dependent welfare queen.

One wishes that those, like Maya Angelou, who find the seeds of compassion in Thomas's childhood were right. But the Senate must vote on his record. Thomas, an ardent individualist who rejects government's role in protecting minority groups or classes, sees himself as a judicial Lone Ranger astride the horse of conservative libertarianism. There, in what is at once legal philosophy and self-image, lies the great challenge posed by his nomination: whether the Senate will

Bruce Shapiro is director of Supreme Court Watch, a project of The Nation Institute.

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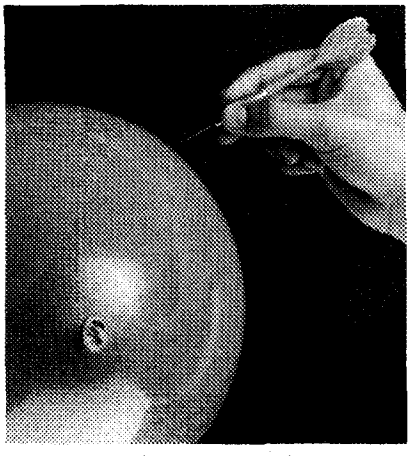

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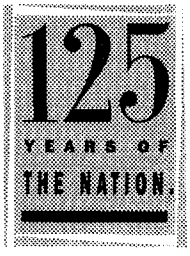

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approve not just Thomas himself but his far-reaching commitment to unravel the fabric of community and social responsibility. □

Little Schools

(*Continued From Front Cover*)

news media. Fame they don't need. Instead of helping to revitalize public education, their short-lived success stories help breed cynicism about public institutions. The movement to privatize American education, which has gathered considerable momentum in the past decade, thrives on their stories [see Meier, "Choice Can *Save* Public Education," March 4].

The Bronx New School's record of achievement is not in dispute. It served a largely "at risk" population but also attracted some middle-class families. Begun three years ago by a group of Bronx parents dissatisfied with the local public schools, it operated out of the small cramped basement of a local church while it awaited and helped redesign a larger space that would enable it to expand from under a hundred students to several hundred. It always intended to stay small, at least in comparison with the huge size of the average New York City public school, and envisioned gradually adding a middle or secondary school. But it didn't intend to change its style, roughly modeled after the successful Central Park East schools in East Harlem, to which some parents had earlier bused their children at considerable inconvenience.

The Bronx New School operated on the basis of a close collaboration between school and family, under a teacher-director who had many years of experience as director of a nursery co-op. It was characterized by inter-age grouping and it didn't separate children by academic ability, two currently much-approved reforms. Children learned at their own pace in a classroom community in which depth rather than superficial coverage of material was emphasized, and children were encouraged to work both collectively and individually, depending on the task and their preferences. The curriculum was built around the interests of young people, and the school's small rooms were alive with activity—hands-on use of scientific and mathematical materials and lots of creative writing and art work, which covered the walls. The parents and staff built their own library by collecting used books and buying new ones with private funds—a practice that Superintendent Reehill criticized, charging them with creating a "private" library. They painted their drab space and built or scrounged for "extras." A parent coordinator to help maintain the high level of family participation, a part-time curriculum specialist and additional library materials were the result of the school's skill at seeking private-sector grants. The additional "riches" that offended the Superintendent were thus not taken away from other district schools. The district's per-pupil expenditure on the Bronx New School was approximately the same as it spent on any other school. The school struggled over the appropriate division of labor between parents and professional staff but didn't give up its belief in the importance of each having a say in the school.

The school's parent body was predominantly low-income; two-thirds were either Latino or African-American. By design, a third were white or "other." Families applied for admission and were selected by lottery; many more than there was space for applied. Both parents and their children loved it. Few students left and none were kicked out. Attendance was nearly perfect. While technically an annex of an existing traditional neighborhood elementary school, in fact its teacher-director reported to the former superintendent and the school had considerable autonomy.

But, as Evelyn Nieves of the *Times* reported, "such success . . . may be the school's downfall." The current plan is to eliminate its leadership, merge it with classes from the nearby neighborhood school and place it under the direct control of that school's principal. That will be the end, parents and staff agree.

The most interesting part of the story is that few school reformers get exercised over such events. The people who kill such schools count on this. The death of the Bronx New School seems a small matter in the larger scheme of things. The reformers find such small-scale, homemade changes of little importance—after all, the Bronx New School affects only a few hundred kids. New York, they say, has a million pupils. What is needed, they claim, are macro reform measures that affect all schools equally and reach desperate millions, rather than highly personalized inventions of a small group of practitioners, parents and kids. Some reformers even agree with Superintendent Reehill that such schools are inherently unfair because they provide for a lucky few a quality education that remains inaccessible to the vast majority. But that's like attacking a low-income housing project because it hasn't solved the housing problems of *all* low-income people.

It's precisely this mindset, not the authoritarianism of a particular superintendent or the political ambitions of a particular school board member, that is killing the Bronx New School, and by extension hundreds of others like it. What Reehill found most offensive may have been the Bronx New School's independent style: hiring a director who hadn't come up through the system, creating the alleged "private library," developing a different form of decision making. "They have to realize that in New York City they have rules and regulations. . . . It is a public school, not a private school," he told the *Times*. That bureaucrats should resent schools that thrive on acting with unauthorized autonomy is understandable. That bureaucrats can get away with dismantling these schools at a time when educational reform is such a popular cause is less understandable. Why so little protest from those education policy-makers busy attending conferences and joining task forces? They are not likely to be sympathetic to Reehill's distaste for autonomy. But when he charges the Bronx New School with being "unfair," he hits a responsive chord.

How else to explain the indifference of educators over the past fifteen years to the kind of reforms that occurred in the now-famous East Harlem District 4, and the mere trickle of efforts to replicate the success of the Central Park East schools, with which I have been intimately involved over the past eight-

Deborah W. Meier is principal of Central Park East Secondary School in New York City.

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een years? The lessons of hundreds of successful alternative schools are always dismissed in the same way: "It's really very nice; in fact it's really even remarkable; it's clearly a success story and deserving of praise, but . . ."

What's the but? They aren't reproducible models that can be imposed on unwilling participants. They won't change those who don't want to change. Such schools offer no detailed blueprint for success; they depend too much on idiosyncratic individuals, the right mix of parents and staff, dedicated teachers, unusual families.

What these critics seem to be looking for is a model that mediocre people can carry out, that's standardized and factory-made, that anyone can duplicate by implementing the new curriculum, the latest tests or a new form of governance. "We want reforms that will produce schools like yours," they insist, "but we want ones that are replicable by people who aren't like you."

They're both right and wrong. They're right in saying that the Bronx New Schools of this world are by nature replica-proof. That's the secret of their success. They're wrong, because a good school is by definition unique. The Bronx New School may have been inspired by East Harlem's Central Park East schools, but what people created in the Bronx was not another C.P.E. school but a school that fit their own needs. What the "system" can do is create the structural conditions that encourage people to want to change and give them sufficient autonomy to do so, and that provide support and encouragement even when they blunder in the course of creating their interpretation of the "good school." But in the end the change must be home-grown.

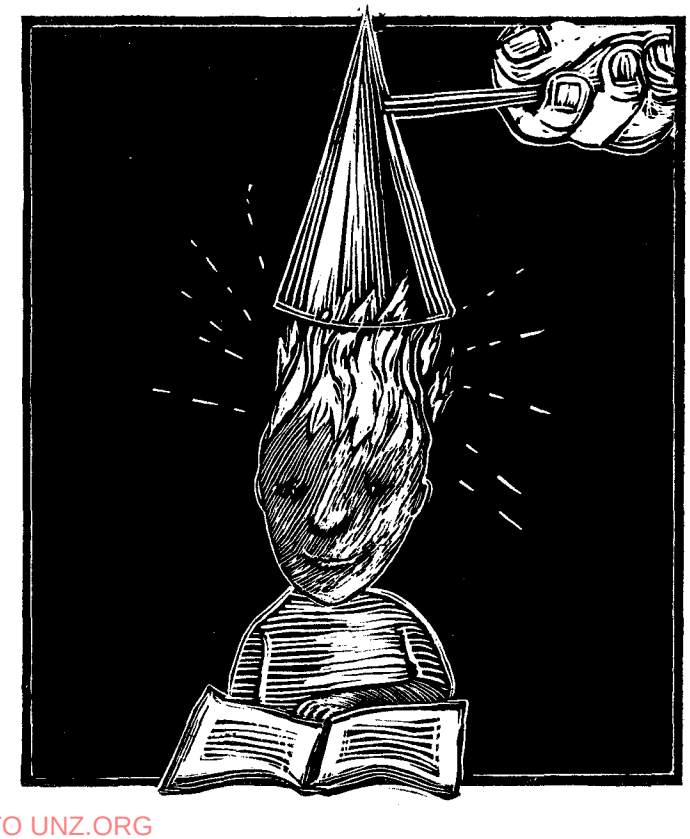
Such a reform agenda won't unleash a massive movement to remake schools overnight. Until we have a sufficiently large number of such different and successful schools we can't and shouldn't win over the skeptics. You can make temporary improvements by decree . . . perhaps. But without substantially increased resources even this is dubious. None of the reforms being touted today in pedagogy, curriculum or governance will in themselves create schools for the future. The essential ingredient for schools that produce intelligent adults is the presence of a community of people exercising their intelligence on a daily basis, coming up with ideas for change and then having the freedom to act on the conclusions they reach. Nothing less than that will work (although more than that is also needed). That's what's so special about the Bronx New School. The people who founded it argued over ideas—the design of a new curriculum, the place of rote learning, noncompetitive ways of evaluating student performance, homework that doesn't baffle parents, the difficulties that can arise between parents and teachers when both want more power.

The only way to produce schools like the Bronx New School is to encourage that sense of "specialness," not attack it. It's a specialness that grows out of the fact that the school is the hard-won and carefully crafted creation of a particular group of people: an act of willed intelligence. A good school is always particular.

But there are potential macro strategies that encourage such innovations. In New York City, Chancellor Joseph Fernandez's "school-based management/shared decision making" concept is not an end in itself, as critics who have followed its history as a national reform agenda have been quick to point out. But it is intended as a strategy, not a solution. The Chicago plan, which turns schools over to a council of parents and teachers with considerable freedom of action, is another macro strategy that can provide a framework for innovation. What is needed is a legislative strategy designed to nurture such particularity, that offers parents and teachers an incentive to break the mold, and some protection once they get under way. To have national impact the new schools must be open to criticism from without—careful and thoughtful responses to their pedagogy and curriculum, and close attention to how well their students are learning.

A good school is always "experimental," always learning from its own experiences. It's a place in which the "having of wonderful ideas," as educator Eleanor Duckworth noted in a book by that title, becomes the essence of education. Not only does such an environment encourage wonderful ideas by its staff, it creates a community powerful enough to convince young people that having wonderful ideas is at the heart of a good life.

The impact upon young people of such an education is long-range and powerful. This is not conjecture; it has been proved time and again. The latest study of the graduates of the Central Park East elementary schools showed that almost every one of them finished high school and most went on to college. In interviews the students described how much it had meant to them to study in a climate in which their ideas were taken seriously. The success of the C.P.E. secondary school in transforming the lives and hopes of its overwhelmingly low-income African-American and Latino students is equally in-



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disputable. What the C.P.E. schools, like the Bronx New School, are about is the creation of powerful communities of people who know one another well and take one another seriously (which involves quarreling).

Above all, what such communities produce is lots of face-to-face exchanges about the meaning of their institutions, and the power and autonomy to change them. They reproduce a powerful public discourse on what it means to be a well-educated person. Weekly staff meetings generate lively discussions over everything from the appropriate dress code to improved ways to report students' performance to their parents. What, if any, common set of facts all students should know is the kind of topic that in the context of a real school setting, focusing on real young people, engenders thoughtful discussion that enriches not only teachers but parents and students. A school community that together looks at samples of student work and argues over its merits, as well as ways to respond, is engaged in the most effective form of staff development. The debate over multiculturalism and Eurocentrism takes place publicly in such schools and can't be sidestepped with generalities. In designing a one-year curriculum around the "peopling of the Americas," the Central Park East school system spent considerable time thinking through the differences between voluntary and forced migrations, ways to tell the Columbus story and so on. It worked out ways to focus on essential "habits of mind" that made it possible to use a wide variety of texts, even many traditional Eurocentric ones, as stimulants to deeper thought on the part of the C.P.E. faculty and students. Such schools are living examples to their students of the power of ideas and the value of education.

For those of us who believe that public education is feasible and essential to democracy, the capacity of public institutions to allow for autonomy is critical. There is no reason that public schools can't be as imaginative and exciting as independent schools. Public doesn't have to mean drab and uniform, standardized and bureaucratic. Let's give reform a chance by letting parents, students and teachers invent their own schools. When critics say "not fair," let's respond by offering them the same deal, rather than taking it away from those who are using it so well. □

EDITORIALS.

(*Continued From Page 325*)

of the abortive coup—the strong leadership of the Russian Republic coexisting with the powerless leadership of the central government. There is no clear idea of the respective rights of these two centers or the conditions for their coexistence.

The main task of democracy at this stage is to neutralize as quickly as possible the points of stress, the sources of conflict and the possible growth of dissatisfaction of the population in Russia. All resources must be utilized for rapid improvement of the food situation in Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk and other industrial centers. Privatization and the involvement of millions of people in economic operations must be accelerated. The status of the Russian Republic and its vision for further changes in the country must be finally determined. The West must know what will remain and what will develop in the territory of the quondam Soviet Union. Yeltsin must broaden the social base of his power, he must use the growth of Russian national consciousness in the interests of democracy and he must stand upon a base of historical legitimacy.

Aleksandr Tsipko, a philosopher, is a leading figure in the democratic movement.

ZHORES A. MEDVEDEV AND ROY MEDVEDEV

Without doubt, it was conservative forces in the Communist Party and the K.G.B., along with some generals in the army, that attempted the coup d'etat. The countercoup, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, was clearly anti-Communist. But Yeltsin has no constructive democratic program. He has the support not only of democratic reformers but of Russophiles, the Orthodox Church and even monarchists. Signs of a new cult of personality and a tendency toward dictatorial decisions are showing up in Yeltsin's camp.

However, an unquestionable weakening of the central administration and a strengthening of the role of the republics have taken place. The disintegration of the Communist Party in its traditional form will result in the emergence of a parliamentary party (renamed the Socialist Party). Under conditions of increasing financial and economic dislocation, real democratic reforms will be difficult.

The main thing the reformers need to understand is that they are dealing with a complex economy, especially in the area of production. A higher level of productivity in the new union can be achieved only through technical modernization. Up to now, we have seen a struggle for power; the needs of the economy have been secondary. The reformers must understand that in a country as large as this one, changes in productive forces and productive relationships must proceed slowly and gradually in order to avoid chaos.

Zhores A. Medvedev, a biologist, was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1973. Roy Medvedev, a historian, is a member of the Congress of People's Deputies.

★

SPIES, RECONSIDERED

The Moscow news has made it quite a strain
To contemplate Guy Burgess and Maclean,
For now their party's over, always will be.
And think of all that spying! Think of Philby!
We have to ask ourselves: 'Twas all for naught
They did those things they really hadn't ought?

Calvin Trillin

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READING AROUND.

ELIZABETH POCHODA

Bush Babies

The relentless **Texas Observer** (July 26) is still compiling its dark-side version of the Bush family scrapbook. Following upon Pete Brewton's excellent coverage of son Neil's part in the S&L scandal comes David Armstrong's investigation of George Jr.'s association with a select company of international banks, C.I.A. operatives, and drug and gun runners in his role as a director of the Harken Energy Corporation. Harken holds the exclusive right to oil development for offshore fields of the island of Bahrain, which is situated right off the coast of . . . yes, Kuwait. Even if young George were not part of it, Harken makes a fascinating story. Conspiracy theorists take note.

The Pure and the Impure

Environmental groups may be the first activists since the Bolsheviks to be plagued less by failure than by success. **Rolling Stone** has a recent pair of pieces on the matter. In the August 22 issue Bill Gifford describes the growth of the Environmental Defense Fund as a result of its successful campaign to help McDonald's deep-six the foam clamshell, and in the September 5 issue Tom Horton writes at exhausting length about the "evolution" of Greenpeace from a ragtag group of idealists twenty years ago to an organization with annual revenues of $160 million. In both cases the gains have excited criticism from longtime environmentalists who consider the brown-nosing of big business by the E.D.F. and the globalization of Greenpeace alarming developments for the movement. Why alarming? As set up in these articles it's hard to say, since the criticism is so wan.

Race

If articles about foreign affairs, especially the gulf war and the coup in the Soviet Union, remain anemic, writing on domestic issues, especially race, is heating up nicely. In the same issue of **Rolling Stone** as the Greenpeace article, William Greider speculates that Bush is playing the race card—this time in the form of affirmative action—to evade the hard domestic social and economic issues. But no one has been nearly as eloquent and devastating on the cynicism and the ugliness of the President's racial policies as Bill Bradley in his recent speech at the Capitol, delivered to an empty Senate gallery but printed largely intact in the September **Harper's**.

Going back a month to the August **Harper's**, Jim Traub's piece on the black talk show hosted by Gary Byrd from the Apollo Theater and aired on WLIB in New York makes a crucial contribution to the race debate by describing the parallel psychic realities inhabited by blacks and whites in this country. Essential reading for anyone who wants to understand why Professor Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York has garnered such a large following, among people who should know better, for a crackpot theory about racial differences. In the September **Atlantic**, Traub has another interesting piece, this time on the not-entirely-unacceptable resegregation of the Oklahoma City public school system. The new quarterly **Reconstruction** missed an opportunity to take on the ubiquitous Jim Sleeper, whose view in *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (Norton) that broad-based class politics should replace the politics of race is receiving a lot of comment but very little substantial criticism, excepting Haywood Burns's in this magazine [December 3, 1990]. Laura Walker and James A. McPherson explore the Sleeper (actually the Alinsky, if you want to go back that far) thesis but offer nothing that Sleeper can't easily handle. Also along these lines, see Michael Kinsley's "TRB" column in the August 19–26 **New Republic** for the argument that affirmative action could work if based on class and not race.

Finally, in the current issue of **New Word**, a magazine that resembles an African-American version of **Interview** except that it has some political concerns, an interview with director Matty Rich (*Straight Out of Brooklyn*) suggests that he may be the one among the new black directors to break through Hollywood and say something new about black communities.

In the Heart of Heartland

The September **Atlantic** also has an excerpt from William Least Heat-Moon's forthcoming *PrairyEarth*, in which the author of *Blue Highways* uncovers more about that section of unknown America that lies between the two coasts. The loving, fascinating portrait of Chase County, Kansas, is easily equal to parts of that other great book on the region, Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*, and that's saying quite a lot.

Mary, Not Contrary

Although a strange editorial note apologizes for its lack of polish and McCarthyite wit, I don't think Mary McCarthy's account in the summer **Paris Review** of meeting and marrying Edmund Wilson needs any apologies. Tears maybe, but no excuses. Here is Mary, for once unbuttoned and undefended, describing how she was able to ignore her love for Philip Rahv long enough to turn to the comforts of Wilson, whom she did not especially care for. (*Nation* readers may take special pleasure in discovering that the magazine's legendary literary editor Margaret Marshall took time off from her labors to act as a cover for the McCarthy-Wilson affair.) Ah, the fifties recollected in tranquillity! What could be more affecting than the following moment of emotion between those two self-created intellectual dragons, Hannah Arendt and M.M., on the subject of the latter's obit for Rahv so many years later? Arendt: " 'So, my dear, you loved him. I never knew.' " McCarthy: "Maybe, till she said it, I had not known it myself." Such were the deformations of smart women in the decade of shame.

Also in the same issue of **PR**, don't miss Marilyn Hacker's "Cleis," a poem for her teenage daughter witty enough to unwrap a crucial question about mother love:

> When I was in love with her, with a lover's
> tendency to mythify the beloved,
> did I know her better than I do now, when
> we know our limits?

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BOOKS & THE ARTS.

True Confessions

GRACE SCHULMAN

ANNE SEXTON. *By Diane Wood Middlebrook. Houghton Mifflin. 488 pp. $24.95.*

Diane Wood Middlebrook's biography of Anne Sexton, the award-winning poet who died a suicide in 1974, is arresting because of the subject's complexity. Sexton was a junior-college dropout who, turning to poetry in emotional distress, wrote seriously and won the Pulitzer Prize as well as three honorary doctorates. She was crazy and yet acutely rational; self-absorbed and yet generous to new writers. Largely unread, she urged women artists on one occasion to "honor the work of other writers. . . . Keep their books around and let those books love you in your honest endeavor to tell it true."

In fact, her life's passionate extremes were fundamental to her energy. A disciplined artist, she had an outrageously sexual image that embarrassed colleagues, as when, reading at Poetry International in London, she "threw wide her arms like a pop singer embracing her audience, and blew them a fat kiss." She touched others with her vitality. For example, the actress Marian Seldes, after performing in one of Sexton's plays, said that she had "something inside saying, 'I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm seething, I'm burning. . . . I'm burning, if you come too close, you'll get burned.' She really had it."

As one might expect, the biography of a poet who wrote intimately of illicit loves, masturbation, menstruation, drug addiction, incest and suicidal desires is an unveiled account of her personal life. Middlebrook spares us nothing. She looks hard at the depressed housewife and mother from suburban Boston who, after a try on her life and a "rebirth at 29," wrote poetry to stave off the desire to die. She explores Sexton's adulteries in a rather decadent milieu where " 'poets were always in love.' " (And let me emphasize, lest Sexton be cudgeled for this—as professional women are even now—that she was more candid than others but not necessarily more prone.) In harrowing detail, Middlebrook describes Sexton's abuses of a daughter that echoed abuses to which the poet had been a victim. For the most part, the biographer manages to elevate this raw matter throughout the well-written book.

Like others of her generation, Sexton was frustrated by society's fixed feminine role: "the first prom, the first kiss, the first baby." The movies, women's magazines and even some women's schools supported the notion that decent women took naturally to homemaking and mothering. Resisting that ideal, implicitly or openly, were several Boston women poets who flowered in the 1950s and 1960s: Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath and Sexton's remarkably abiding friend, Maxine Kumin. Like Plath among them, Sexton was hard put to prevail. As Levertov was to observe years later (in "Light Up the Cave," not quoted in the biography), "She . . . was unable to separate her depression and her obsession with death from poetry itself."

'All I am is the trick of words writing themselves.'

For her trancelike states, amnesias and depressions, Sexton was treated by Dr. Martin Orne, a psychiatrist who diagnosed hysteria and who, among other things, encouraged her to write. A good deal of attention—as well as criticism—has focused on Middlebrook's use of the audio tapes that Dr. Orne made to help Sexton confront blocked-out material. It appears now that Middlebrook received those tapes only after years of examining letters, journals of therapy sessions and hospital records; and further, that in releasing anything, Sexton's literary executor (her daughter Linda Gray Sexton) acted according to the poet's wishes.

In any event, the psychiatric sessions—which make up a relatively small portion of the book—seem less helpful than other documents in illuminating either the poet's life or her poems. Even when they are read with caution, mindful of their clinical purpose, diction and context, they are curiously unrevealing. Regarding the poems, Sexton was a conscious artist whose inspiration came not from therapy but from God. As for the person, therapy portraits, as many of us know, can be, and perhaps must be, grossly distorted, far beyond diaries and ordinary interviews.

Of far more value than transcripts of the treatment sessions is a letter Sexton wrote to Dr. Orne in 1958, based on an insight in her therapy:

> Of course I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than I would ever know. . . . All I am is the trick of words writing themselves.

The letter points to a method of transmuting raw material (metaphor; rapid associative turns, counterbalanced by rhythmic pauses; intermittent near-rhymes and bold rhymes) that, I believe, distinguishes Anne Sexton's superb poems from the many bad ones in her 622-page *Complete Poems* (1981), and even in the pared-down 266-page *Selected Poems* (1988).

Middlebrook is, properly, entranced by her subject and sympathetic to the poems. The question, though, of whether Sexton merits her biographer's ten-year examination and our sometimes flinching attention requires searching thought about the poems—especially since, as the bibliography indicates, there is only one full-length critical study of Sexton's work and six editions of short essays, reviews and interviews, alone or in combination. She is powerful, I feel, but only for her first three books of the 1960s, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, *All My Pretty Ones* and *Live or Die*. The weak poems, which existed throughout her career, began to multiply in 1969, ironically when Sexton's books were selling more than 20,000 copies altogether, the new *Love Poems* leading with 14,147.

We learn from the biography that some major poets encouraged her to the end, but that many of them commended only her early books. In a cover blurb on *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Robert Lowell said, "Her poems stick in my mind." In a review praising *All My Pretty Ones*, Richard Howard found her "strong, colloquial diction" to be a "lucid obstruction to sentimentality." And the publication of *Live or Die* was followed by the Pulitzer Prize as well as the Shelley

Grace Schulman, whose latest collection of poems is Hemispheres *(Sheep Meadow), is poetry editor of* The Nation.

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Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America. Even C.K. Williams, who befriended Sexton in the later years, had reservations about "The Death of the Fathers" (1970). He was to reverse his opinion later, but his first take was astute: "There isn't enough *dumbness* in the poem, enough of that language that floats just above incoherency, the incoherency of those mysteries of time and love that fatherhood and childhood embody."

"Those mysteries" were, I believe, created brilliantly in the poet's early work. Sexton wrote in what M.L. Rosenthal called the "confessional" genre, a mode that characterized the inward turnings of Plath, John Berryman and Sexton's mentor, Lowell, among others. Her best poems contain the autobiographical "I," but are strategically manipulated. (Middlebrook points out that in Sexton's life, as well as in her art, she would alter the truth to fit the emotional context.) One of her powerful metaphors was of witchery; language was her "code," her "trickery," her "secret rites" in the early poem "An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery, Love." In the wonderful poem "The Black Art," we hear: "She thinks she can warn the stars." And "Her Kind" is a consummate dramatization of Witch Sexton spooking a clean suburban area:

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind.

To create those personae of the early poems, she uses images that are distorted and yet given in minute detail: "the strangled cold of November" in "Music Swims Back to Me"; "one black-haired tree slips/up like a drowned woman into the hot sky" in "The Starry Night."

My sense is that in the later work she became too conscious of the personae that emerge, earlier, as by magic. Whereas before she had dramatized the self, often as a sorcerer, later she comments on that dramatization, as in "The Gold Key" of *Transformations* (1971), her retold fairy tales, where she mocks herself as "a middle-aged witch, me." More seriously, there are the too-easy comparisons between her problems and the Holocaust, in poems such as "For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open." And although they occupy another realm, her poems of "The Jesus Papers" offend for like reasons. In "Jesus Asleep," for example, she projects her childish fantasies onto her figure without creating a self that will embody the legend.

The biography does not deal with it, but I surmise Sexton's lack of proportion to be a tragic flaw in her life *and* art. Unlike Levertov, Kumin, Rich and the major confessionals, she missed the true relation between her own life and large events. At the same time, she was heroic in her intentions—as well as in her actual struggle to overcome personal frailties.

Middlebrook's frankness continues even to the last sorrowful years of Sexton's life. True, Sexton's energy remained. She taught poetry workshops. She gave readings that were performances. In her rock group, Anne Sexton and Her Kind, she read her poems while musicians played settings. On the other hand, her self-indulgences wore out some friendships and disaffected family members. She experienced repeated hospitalizations, further suicide attempts, domestic violence, alcohol and drugs, a divorce she initiated and then regretted.

Although I found it painful to read of

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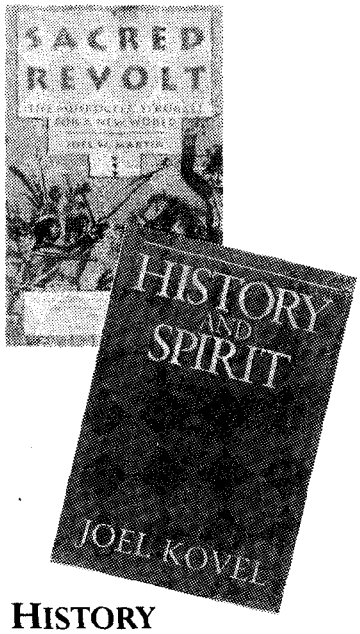

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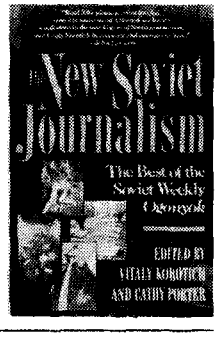

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VERSO

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that misery, I admire Middlebrook's intelligent, sensitive biography. She portrays Anne Sexton for her suffering, wisdom, intensity and, at times, a kind of grandeur. Most important, I believe, the biography illuminates the poems in providing a comprehensive frame so that readers can see at what great distance from the life the poet practiced her life*like* art. □

Rethinking the World

JAN CLAUSEN

REWEAVING THE WORLD: The Emergence of Ecofeminism. *Edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein. Sierra Club Books. 320 pp. $25. Paper $14.95.*

RETHINKING ECOFEMINIST POLITICS. *By Janet Biehl. South End Press. 181 pp. Paper $10.*

Beginning in the late 1970s, the United States and Europe saw a remarkable surge of independent feminist organizing focused on the environment and peace. Feminist and lesbian affinity groups mobilized against nuclear power plants. A 1980 Massachusetts conference on Women and Life on Earth paved the way for the Women's Pentagon Action protests, with their pageantry and other creative tactics. Women's peace encampments at Greenham Common in England and at the Seneca Army Depot in upstate New York offered a critique of militarism far more radical in both form and content than most of what was going on in the nuclear disarmament and nuclear freeze campaigns. The contemporary ecofeminist movement owes much to this wave of activism; it also draws inspiration from poetic and scholarly texts such as Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution.*

From the start, the reasons for women to claim a special relationship to issues of planetary survival were vigorously debated. In keeping with a popular brand of cultural feminism that has attempted to solve the problem of evil by "standing patriarchy on its head," some feminists pinned their hopes for saving the world on presumed universal female values of nurturing, preservation and compassion. More sophisticated and self-critical thinkers rejected this ahistorical view. Recognizing that the feminine virtues and masculine vices are not discrete essences but opposites that endlessly reproduce one another within patriarchy, they nevertheless sniffed out a "gender agenda" beneath the Western ideals of scientific detachment, rational control and transcendence of the flesh. They asked whether women, ranked "closer to nature" in masculinist ideologies, might not be positioned to contribute uniquely to a radical redefinition of humanity's place in the ecosphere.

The urgency of this question in an atmosphere of escalating environmental crisis suggests the need for theory capable of combining intellectual rigor and imaginative insight, in order to overcome the split between thinking and feeling often cited by feminists as yet another disastrous legacy of the Western tradition. A cross section of such work is what I naturally hoped to find in an anthology titled *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism.*

Although editors Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein promise that the collection's first section will explore the development of their subject "as a social movement and philosophy," they inexplicably scant activist origins in favor of New Agey essays on what perhaps should be called ecospiritualism. While I welcomed Carol P. Christ's soberly reflective "Rethinking Theology and Nature," with its open-ended treatment of the possibility that the universe may have a "center of consciousness," most of these offerings exemplify for me what Adrienne Rich once termed "slattern thought styled intuition." The flesh of my intellect crawled prodigiously indeed when I read Sally Abbott's blithe conjecture that "the cultural recognition of animal rights" could bring about "a restoration to the paradisiacal state"; or Riane Eisler's exhortation to "reawaken from our 5,000-year dominator nightmare and allow our evolution to resume its interrupted course."

In the latter two-thirds of the book are some far more rewarding pieces, most of them either conceptually rigorous analyses of problems involving gender

Jan Clausen's most recent publications are The Prosperine Papers, *a novel (Crossing Press), and* Books & Life, *an essay collection (Ohio State University).*

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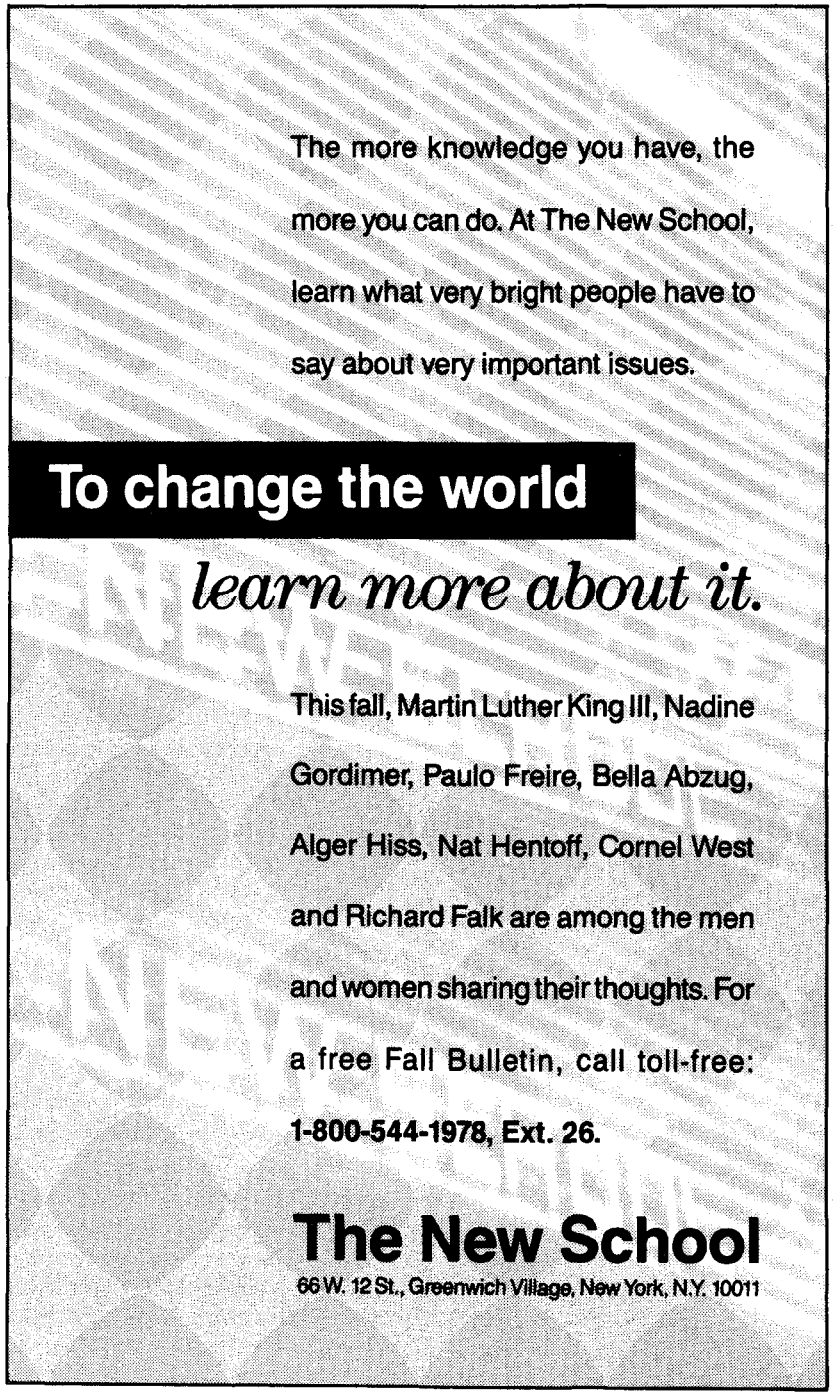
and nature or concrete accounts of women's environmental activism. For the spiritually leery, a good overall introduction to ecofeminist thinking might be Ynestra King's "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism." While this is not the clearest of King's many essays on the subject, it does offer a useful overview of various feminist responses to the problems posed by Western patriarchy's equation of women with a despised natural order. King concludes that both cultural and socialist feminists have stumbled into a dualist trap: cultural feminists by ignoring differences among women and stressing the personal and spiritual at the expense of the historical and political; socialist feminists by buying into the argument that women's liberation means becoming "like men," i.e., radically distinct from and dominant over nature. An ecofeminist position, she claims, can resolve the split by formulating "a dynamic, developmental theory of the person—male *and* female—who emerges out of nonhuman nature."

Also provocative are essays on the relationships between ecofeminism and the deep ecology and bioregional movements. Lee Quinby makes a timely argument against the "totalizing impulses of masculinist politics" and theory (although the widely divergent viewpoints espoused by contributors to this collection will suggest to many readers the advantages of at least a modest and provisional attempt at theoretical coherence among those allied in "decentered political struggle"). Catherine Keller explores the ironic and frightening use of fundamentalist Christian belief in an imminent Second Coming to justify capitalism's plunder of the planet. Keller sounds a welcome note of caution against romanticizing women's traditional roles:

> Many of us have felt and argued that women have been the caretakers of relation, that the dominant separate self of the culture is the male ego. Yet we must at the same time acknowledge that inasmuch as this female relatedness has survived, it has been the very means of women's entrapment, our dependency. And the dependency is no more ecologically viable than the illusion of an independent ego.

Indian ecologist Vandana Shiva's "Development as a New Project of Western Patriarchy" brings conceptual coherence to the familiar claim that women in less industrialized nations suffer disproportionately from the negative effects of Western development schemes. Western definitions of productivity that ignore the life-sustaining values of an intact environment justify the imposition of "maldevelopment" centered on commodity production. Women are marginalized by maldeveloped industrial economies, while environmental damage renders their traditional tasks of collecting water, fodder and fuel ever more burdensome. Shiva points out that, far more commonly than in the West, ecological crises in poor countries pose immediate threats to survival; in consequence, women are at the center of urgent, pragmatic battles to preserve the environment.

Shiva's is the lone essay to offer a truly international dimension—an unfortunate gap in a collection intended to address a planetary crisis intimately bound up with the colonial legacy and capitalist expansion. Also disappointing is the absence of theoretical perspectives of North American women of color (unless, indeed, Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen's advice to prepare for planetary transformation by "asking as many trees as you meet how to be a tree" is meant as a Zen-like rejection of all theory). Having been positioned "closer to nature" in racist as well as sexist ideology, women of color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surely have important contributions to make in rethinking the nature/culture split; in many cases they also possess firsthand knowledge of non-Western traditions that could expand discussion beyond white ecofeminists' focus on the shortcomings of Western patriarchy.

Some of the best pieces on local activism do, however, emphasize the practical concerns of women of color and white working-class women. These include Rachel L. Bagby's interview with her mother, Rachel E. Bagby, about the latter's leadership of a community garden project in an African-American neighborhood, and Cynthia Hamilton's account of a campaign against an incinerator planned for a poor section of Los Angeles. Hamilton points out how organizing initiated by black and Latina women in the affected community eventually drew in women from middle-class neighborhoods.

Not even the most persuasive of these essays convinced me that ecofeminism is likely to provide the last word on the causes and cures of our earthly predicament. Like all progressive politics, ecofeminism emerges from particular groups whose peculiar limitations are intimately linked to the specific experiences that catalyze their most valuable insights. But it has asked important questions no one else has thought to pose—and may yet generate a few invaluable answers, given the necessary effort. It's to be regretted that Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein didn't further this process by using the anthology to clarify if not resolve important theoretical disagreements. (For instance, Riane Eisler's dismissal of the past 5,000 years as "interrupted evolution" seems diametrically opposed to Ynestra King's call for a study of the "embodied woman as social historical agent, rather than as a product of natural law.") This could have been done by asking contributors to consider certain key questions, or simply by organizing the material in a more coherent fashion and providing editorial comment.

A fervent adherent of social ecology theory as developed by Murray Bookchin, Janet Biehl has no patience whatever with the inconsistencies of "really existing ecofeminism." In *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, she shows herself so enraged by the goddess-worshiping and anti-intellectual predilections of some ecofeminists that she ignores the movement's record of activism and its theoretical potential. Indeed, she appears at times willfully to misread writers like Ynestra King and Carolyn Merchant, the better to fit them to her dismissive caricature of "irrational," "atavistic," "obscurantist" Pied Pipers luring feminists away from the Enlightenment.

Having had my own run-ins with feminist atavism, I began Biehl's book in a sympathetic frame of mind. (I well recall the overdose of weaving and "centering" that, following the Women's Pentagon Action, prompted me to write a poem beginning with the declaration, "Furthermore, I abjure/ these textile metaphors," and concluded, "When/ I hear the word *nurture*/ I reach for my/ pen.") However, Biehl's scorn is so indiscriminate, her rhetoric so abusive and her argument so obviously rigged to avoid the serious questions ecofeminism poses about socially constructed relationships between gender and nature that I was soon tempted to give up on her. (Her sneaky tactics even include the claim that ecofeminists who wish to be consistent must "oppose abortion on the grounds that it is destructive to 'life' "—a position no ecofeminist I know of has so much as hinted at.) Subduing my irritation, I fortunately discovered some potentially constructive criticism.

To begin with, Biehl provides a service to all of us who've been too busy to go to the library and verify the hunch that true believers in a Neolithic, goddess-worshiping Eden are on shaky ground. Reviewing literature critical of the work of archeologist Marija Gimbutas, a main proponent of the view that a peaceful, egalitarian European civilization was disrupted about 5,000 years ago by warlike invaders brandishing male deities, Biehl reminds us that theories about societies so ancient are precisely that, theories—not historical accounts. Further, she points out that egalitarianism depends on nonhierarchical institutions, not worship of a goddess:

> Explanation of hierarchy requires a much more careful examination and a more graded development than one that elevates all female figurines to goddesses, ignores the implications of the fact that goddesses were paramount in patricentric and patriarchal societies, dismisses complex transitions in social structures and values with inexplicable invasions, and evokes myths that are more characteristic of Disneyland exhibitions than authentic folk traditions.

Biehl also usefully discusses the limitations of consensus decision-making and the related issue of ecofeminists' reluctance to develop formal structures for po-

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litical struggle. One need not share her extreme negative view of consensus to agree that under some circumstances it could encourage an unhealthy conformity. A difficulty in structuring collective power and managing decision-making is not unique to ecofeminism; it's as old as the inception of the Second Wave (as Jo Freeman's famous early essay on "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" attests) and as recent as this year's national lesbian conference, which nearly foundered on a chaotic and debilitating "process."

Biehl warns that a tendency to glorify the "*oikos* [home] and its values as a substitute for the *polis* and its politics can be read as an attempt to dissolve the political into the domestic, the civil into the familial, the public into the private." The erasure of the social that is endemic in this reactionary era may indeed help account for the popularity of the metaphor-based, "spiritual" brand of ecofeminism so despised by Biehl. However, neither the movement's more interesting thinkers nor the thousands of women who fastened photographs of loved ones to chain-link fences surrounding Army bases and wove webs of yarn in front of the Pentagon's doors have sought to "dissolve" the political into the domestic. Rather, they have attempted a conscious and unprecedented confrontation between the "domestic" and "political" (as traditionally defined) in the interests of transforming both.

Biehl concludes with a tedious summary of Murray Bookchin's views, which seems redundant given his extensive publications. Finally, what is most frustrating in her book is her sly avoidance of the question as to whether there is *anything* in women's culturally conditioned, historically variable, yet specifically gendered experiences that can usefully contribute to understanding and reversing the assault on the environment. In order to answer with a flat "no," one must dismiss not only nostalgie de la Neolithic but Ynestra King's far more rigorously conceived "embodied woman as social historical agent," Vandana Shiva's female targets of "maldevelopment" and the community activists Cynthia Hamilton writes about.

Even beyond this, a "no" would mean discounting many valuable works of feminist theory intimately bound up with environmental issues but not commonly labeled ecofeminist. These include, for instance, Cynthia Enloe's studies of gender ideology as a linchpin of military establishments, Carol Gilligan's work on women's ethical development, Evelyn Fox Keller's writings on gender and science, and Sara Ruddick's philosophical inquiries into the possible (not inevitable) link between mothering and peacemaking. Such perspectives, together with analyses like that of Indian economist Bina Agarwal, whose "feminist environmentalism" focuses on how race and class structure the gender/nature connection, must now inform the necessary efforts to move ecofeminist theory from emergence to fruition. □

Learning From Life

HERBERT KOHL

When Thurgood Marshall announced his resignation from the Supreme Court, a number of high school students in Point Arena, the small, mostly white, Latino and Pomo Indian northern California coastal town I live in, were visibly shaken. I spoke to several of them that day and they told me how inspiring they found his stubbornness, humor and refusal to back down when it came to an issue of justice. And they told me the story of Marshall's great-grandfather, which they had heard in a classmate's report on Marshall's life. The source of the story was *Thurgood Marshall: Supreme Court Justice* by Lisa Aldred, one of the forty volumes of the Chelsea House Publishers' series Black Americans of Achievement that I had lent to their class:

> According to Marshall, his great-grandfather "grew up into one mean man. One day his owner came up to him and said: 'Look, I brought you here so I guess I can't very well shoot you—as you deserve. On the other hand, I can't with a clear conscience sell anyone as vicious as you to another slaveholder. So, I'm going to set you free—on one condition. Get to hell out of this county and never come back.' " That, Marshall added, was "the only time Massuh didn't get an argument from the old boy." Marshall's great-grandfather raised no arguments, but he had no intention of complying with the slaveholder's wishes. He settled down and raised his family just a few miles from his former owner's plantation. "He lived there until the day he died," added Marshall, "and no one ever laid a hand on him."

The students also remembered another quote from Marshall that came from the book. Sounding like his great-grandfather, Marshall said in an interview, "On the racial issue, you can't be a little bit wrong more than you can be a little bit pregnant or a little bit dead."

Racism is an issue for these young people, as it is for everyone in this society. There are tensions among all three groups of students, and there is considerable antiblack sentiment based on personal ignorance, as well as an acceptance of parental prejudice and media representations of African-Americans. Generally nothing happens in school to challenge students' thinking, but recently one junior high teacher was determined to deal with the problem, and we planned a strategy. I knew that the attitudes of students in Point Arena toward African-Americans, though often racist, were tempered by admiration for performers and athletes as well as for Martin Luther King Jr. My guess was that if these students had a chance to become intimate with a range and variety of African-American lives and experience the richness and complexity of African-American culture and politics, they might develop insight into the way that racism impoverishes everybody's life—and take a closer look at the conflicts and hostilities in their own. The idea was to approach racism and stereotyping through multiple biographies that were candid about the social, economic and political circumstances of their subjects' lives.

It's easy to find biographies written for young people but just about impossible to find ones that aren't cleaned up and romanticized. The Chelsea House series is different. The books present direct and unapologetic accounts of the subjects' politics and personal lives, strengths and weaknesses. For example, these are virtually the only biographies for young adults published in the United States that I've encountered that treat left-wing politics in a respectful and serious manner. This is particularly true in the biographies of A. Philip Randolph and Amiri Baraka.

An underlying world ties the series together and exists independent of the books. It is a world defined by its racism.

Herbert Kohl's most recent book is I Will Not Learn From You! *(Milkweed Editions). His dictionary of powerful ideas for young people will appear in spring 1992 (Little, Brown).*

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Every one of these Black Americans of Achievement has been hurt by racism and has had to become especially strong and intelligent in order first to survive, then to thrive. White racism, relentless and cruel, is present in every book—sometimes overt and physical, sometimes directed and personal, sometimes institutional. However, the books do not preach about the evils of racism; rather they show its individual and particular faces. The series has a powerful cumulative effect that makes it clear that the atmosphere of racism in this society is suffocating. Racism becomes a character in these biographies and sometimes it triumphs: This is the history of our nation, after all.

In addition to and in contrast with the unifying presence of racism is the equally unifying presence of blackness, of African roots and memories, of the cultural power of people to resist attempts to steal their souls. This resistance and the creativity it releases is manifested in literature and art, in science, education, politics, religion, law, labor and business. One of the things I like most about this series is the range of opinions, styles and ideas represented. For example, the clashing political and social ideas of Martin Luther King Jr., Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Allen, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Booker T. Washington are all presented with equal respect and in equal fullness. This gives young people a spectrum of ideas and attitudes to confront and choose among. It makes stereotyping impossible and challenges all readers to articulate who they are and where they stand.

The biographies in the Black Americans of Achievement series (seventy-five to date) are illustrated by dozens of black-and-white photos and are all between 105 and 130 pages long. Although they are written by different authors, they follow the same formula. Each book begins with some important mid- or late-life adventure of the subject, then returns to his or her birth and family history. Thus the volume on Paul Laurence Dunbar begins with his graduation, as the only African-American in his class, from Dayton, Ohio's only high school, in 1891. It follows him on a search for work at local newspapers, all of which refused to hire blacks. Chapter two describes his birth, his early development as a poet inspired by Keats and Shelley, and his job working for Frederick Douglass at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. Dunbar's discovery by Dr. H.A. Tobey, a white abolitionist entrepreneur, and his career as an exploited performer of dialect poetry for white audiences is traced through his short life (he died at 33). From the book I discovered that Dunbar had written many different kinds of verse, as well as lyrics to musicals and a number of novels. The characters in his first one, *The Uncalled*, were white, and Dunbar was severely criticized for presuming to know enough about white people to write about them.

It made me angry that I had not known Dunbar's moving story before. When I was teaching in Harlem in the 1960s I decided not to use Dunbar's poetry in class. I was afraid to read in dialect and had no materials to provide my students with a context for his life and work. I needed this biography then. Now I teach it along with the biographies of Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes and Amiri Baraka, both to integrate their writings into my curriculum and to bring history and culture into the study of literature.

These books provoked the most passionate discussion of race the teacher had heard.

Despite its frankness about racism and politics, the series has some deficiencies. The biography of James Baldwin, by Lisa Rosset, describes his friends and lovers as "the members of his entourage—a group of friends and acquaintances who seemed to appear like magic wherever he was staying." Because the book avoids mentioning that Baldwin was gay, his personal life seems shallow and loveless. The other volumes in the series are clear about the important relationships in the lives of their subjects, and they unflinchingly present violence, racial confrontations, sexual harassment, heterosexual marriage and love affairs. However, an editorial decision must have been made that homosexuality was taboo in biographies for young people. This makes it impossible to get a coherent understanding of Baldwin's life and work from Rosset's book. It avoids the issue of how homophobia tormented Baldwin, and diminishes his stature in our literature. It is foolish for a series as bold and creative as Black Americans of Achievement to closet gay life. Perhaps

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a revised edition of the otherwise well-written and interesting Baldwin biography will give us a more truthful picture.

It is also regrettable that in all the volumes Chelsea House has already published there is only one biography of a woman writer, that of Zora Neale Hurston. In fact, in the entire current biography series, men's lives outnumber women's by more than five to one, and the emphasis is on women entertainers and athletes rather than on activists and intellectuals. These are unpardonable mistakes, which it seems will be somewhat rectified in the future. Projected volumes include lives of Ida Wells-Barnett, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, among others. Chelsea House also publishes a series called American Women of Achievement. There are a few African-American women's biographies here, but not enough to reflect the substantial contribution of African-American women to culture, politics and national life in the United States. A clutch of women's biographies in the series created a sensation in the junior high class in Point Arena. They were the stories of Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald and (borrowed from American Women of Achievement) Marian Anderson. The girls in the class grabbed them, and then began to play their music. What astonished the youngsters was the range and variety of music, the passion and sensitivity of all of these women's voices and the diversity of their lives. Reading the biographies, discussing the singers' lives and the lives of musicians in this society as well as listening to their music, the teacher told me, provoked the most passionate and serious discussion of the effects of ignorance on the development of racist and sexist attitudes that he had ever heard.

I believe that Black Americans of Achievement, or series like it (such as Silver Burdett's The History of the Civil Rights Movement, with its exceptional biographies of Fanny Lou Hamer, Ella Baker and Rosa Parks), must be in our classrooms. All children need to know these stories, but African-American children especially need to know these lives. They need to know about the ways in which black creativity has confronted racism, and about the triumphs and sacrifices that have been made in the struggle for decency. My fear, however, is that the books will be available only in affluent communities where schools can afford to purchase them, not in places like

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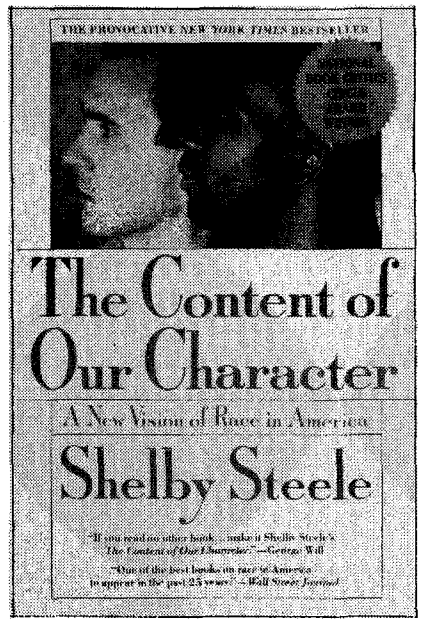

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FILMS.

STUART KLAWANS

Barton Fink
Dead Again
Lesbian & Gay Experimental Films

In the early 1970s, Philip Roth brought out a story called "On the Air," a hallucinatory foray into Jewish conceptions of the Gentile. Set on the eve of the Second World War, the story dropped its point-of-view character into an America of beefy, red-necked killers, grinning imbeciles and Kate Smith lookalikes—what the character imagined to be the *real* world of the *goyim*, which They kept concealed beneath the niceties of radio shows. "On the Air" is a snarling, rabid dog of a story, likely to rip out the throat of any reader who comes near it. Today, I bet, nobody would publish it.

Substitute Roth's fascination with radio for an obsession with the movies, and you've got Joel and Ethan Coen's *Barton Fink*. A gaga near-masterwork full of Jewish paranoia, and Jewish feelings of guilt about being paranoid, *Barton Fink* not only got produced but also won three of the four top awards at the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. You may draw your own conclusions about the relative vitality of American literature and film.

Your ponderings, in fact, will lead you straight into the plot. Fink (John Turturro), a young, politically committed New York playwright in the 1940s, has just scored his first Broadway hit. Now Hollywood calls. Fink has only contempt for the movies, but in order to finance his art and ideals he is willing to sell out, just a little. He checks into an eerie, apparently deserted hotel in Los Angeles, pays a visit to the effusive vulgarian who owns Capitol Pictures (Michael Lerner, in a hurricane of a performance) and then settles down to work on his first assignment—a wrestling picture, starring Wallace Beery.

Fink stares at the blank sheet in his typewriter. He stares at the wallpaper, with its pattern of brown, rotten-looking banana leaves. He can't write a line, and no wonder. Here he is in the fantasy capital, working for a man who cheerfully describes himself as "bigger and meaner than any kike in this town," when he's supposed to be creating a new American theater, of and for the Common Man.

Enter the Common Man, in the person of the guy next door. Charlie Meadows (John Goodman) is a burly traveling salesman who wears pictures of dice on his suspenders and of a naked woman on the underside of his tie. He offers Fink a nip of whiskey and a large supply of stories. Fink accepts only the former. He wants to write about the Common Man but clearly is too impatient to listen to one, too caught up in his own fantasies and frustrations and desires. Fink doesn't really want to know Charlie, but he's somehow conjured him up and now finds that the man is just too big to ignore.

So *Barton Fink* is itself going to be a wrestling picture, the drama of a man in conflict with his own conscience, or perhaps of Jacob struggling with the *goy*. Many typewriter ribbons could be pounded into oblivion analyzing how the Coens develop this theme—so let's talk instead about that brown wallpaper. It's the first thing you see in the movie and in a sense is the most important, since it contains everything else. The wallpaper might almost be the lining of Barton Fink's skull.

Even if you insist on interpreting its events as happening outside in some real world, *Barton Fink* is an intensely claustrophobic film. Granted, the images that stick in the mind are exuberant, hyperbolic, outrageous, qualities for which the Coen brothers are celebrated (or notorious, take your pick). The least you can say in the Coens' favor is that they try hard; in the case of *Barton Fink*, I can go beyond that by promising that the climax is unlike anything you have heretofore gaped at in disbelief. What makes the film so strange, though, is that its mania erupts in a story about solitude, in which a man sits by himself in a little room for hours and hours. It's also strange, and appropriate, that the Coens' elaborate style, which has always been so concerned with visual punch, should now be wedded to language, creating the sort of married couple you have to wonder about.

A number of the more striking images in *Barton Fink* are puns, in which the Coens show what it means to come unglued or to go down the drain. Mimicking the thought processes of a writer who is going insane, the film takes words too literally. As if by extension, it also concentrates to an extraordinary degree on sound. The audible is always competing with the visible in *Barton Fink*, from the moment the title character first steps into the lobby of his Los Angeles hellhole and taps a bell on the registration desk. The interminable ping that follows is only the beginning of the auditory distractions that will plague Fink. Who is making all the racket in the hotel? Why can't Fink imagine what the characters in his screenplay should be hearing? Will Fink ever listen to Charlie Meadows's stories? And what's wrong with Charlie's ear?

As Charlie, John Goodman comes close to stealing the movie from Turturro, largely because Barton Fink is of no interest in himself. Fink is a locus for hallucinations—all the interesting parts of his character have been projected outside. It's a difficult assignment for an actor, which Turturro carries off well; and yet, even though the whole film is shot from his point of view, he never establishes a sense of immediacy. Perhaps he and the Coens have relied too heavily on his looks—they've given him high-rise Brillo hair and funny little eyeglasses and done everything possible to exaggerate his overbite. Or perhaps he's been asked to be too much of a rubber band: Fink either shrinks into himself, shunning contact with the world, or else stretches wide into sputtering speech. Turturro does what he can to make you feel the potential of one state existing in tandem with the other, but mostly he just goes snap. Goodman has the better role, since he gets to be several people at once—a threatening hulk, a gladhand, a simpleton, a protector—and portrays them all effortlessly.

Still, it's curious that a live wire like Turturro doesn't come across more vividly, even in the role of a repressed nerd (he played one in *Jungle Fever* and all but jumped off the screen). The explanation, I think, has to do with the Coens' attitude toward the artistic and political position that Fink represents. They have lots of fun using Fink to parody the corniness of old scripts in the Clifford Odets style. For people as bright as the Coens, that's not hard. What they can't do, or won't attempt, is to delve into the feelings that underlay Odets's work. They get the stilted language and forced heartiness right; they get the anger and compassion wrong.

In "On the Air," Philip Roth spewed bile for forty-two pages. He also provided a motive for this rhetorical enormity: The character through whom he was spewing was scared to death of Hitler. *Barton Fink* is set in the same period as "On the Air,"

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but the smell of burning flesh in the movie is little more than another element of the fantasy, another cause for wised-up laughter, like Fink's desire to "make a difference" for working people. I don't think this callousness ruins the movie (which in my book is a must-see); at worst, it makes Fink seem more hollow than he should be. But I hope that someday the Coens, having risked every setup and camera movement they can conceive, will face the ultimate dare. I hope they will take Barton Fink at his word.

Dead Again, directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh, cannot compete with *Barton Fink* for complexity or originality. All the same, it holds up nicely in comparison because it offers something that the Coens withhold, something that Branagh provided so memorably in his debut film, *Henry V*: It gives you the satisfaction people used to get from an old-fashioned form of drama, which in recent years has been ironized almost to death.

Henry V improbably revived heroism. It did so self-consciously, with an awareness that martial glory is always paid for with other people's blood and usually proves to be futile; but Branagh delivered the glory all the same, and in a remarkably unfussy manner. Now, working from a clever screenplay by Scott Frank, he has repeated the trick, making a 1940s-style Hollywood melodrama that plays as if it had been released the day after *Laura*. There are plenty of winks at the audience; one of the film's pleasures, in fact, is that you sense Branagh and his leading lady, Emma Thompson, are having a grand time playing dress-up. But Branagh and Thompson, in their bid to become American movie stars, have had the good sense to choose a worthy star vehicle and the good taste not to mock it. Everybody from Douglas Sirk to George Kuchar has taken a crack at melodrama by now; everybody knows how to be arch about it. But who else, in 1991, could put together a story about a mystery woman, complete with candelabras and Rachmaninoff, and bring it off with flair?

The theme—yes, there's even a theme—cannot be explained without giving away the plot, so well is the film constructed. I can say only that there's a murder in the past, a woman with amnesia in the present, a busybody of a hypnotist (played by Derek Jacobi) and a dual reincarnation. That much you can get even from the trailer. For the rest, you're on your own. I will insert myself into the film only to point out Robin Williams's performance in a supporting role as a defrocked psychiatrist. Notice the anger and hostility he conveys; notice how, in his first scene, he sometimes takes long pauses between lines. Branagh, as director, has slowed him down and so brought out an atypically convincing performance from him; Williams's usual intensity is there, but this time it's harnessed to the character. Such are the wonders that Branagh promises to work, if Paramount Pictures will only keep him in America.

Note to the Paramount publicity department (release at will): Fantastic! Stupendous! Overpowering! Keen! 27 stars (highest rating)!—*The Nation*.

Nation readers who find themselves in New York this month might want to drop by Anthology Film Archives, where Su Friedrich's latest film will have its world premiere as part of the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival.

What has same-sex love got to do with experimental film? Ultimately, nothing. When the revolution comes and we all eat strawberries and cream, every form of love will be respected and nobody will ever feel queer. Until then, many lesbians and gays are likely to see the world a bit differently than do heterosexuals. Since experimental artists try to see things differently, too, you might think of this festival as an alliance of convention-breakers. The exception this time is Friedrich, who refuses to conform even that much. Setting herself apart from those who are set apart, she uses her new film to confess an urge to be like other girls. She wants to be a bride.

At least she'll consider it. *First Comes Love* consists of footage shot at a Catholic wedding in the New York area—Brooklyn, I'd say—overlaid with a soundtrack of old pop songs. The images initially look like somebody's home movies. But home movies don't have these slow, studied pans, these cuts that reveal how several people make the same gesture, these camera angles that seem both curious and shy, as if the filmmaker were part anthropologist, part kid at the candy store window. And then there's the light. Friedrich likes to shoot everything smack in the middle of the gray scale. There's little sense of either strong light or shadow but rather an abrupt, dramatic break in the image whenever objects disappear into shimmering whiteness or a flat black. That's the effect you get in the film's central shot, when a glowing bride stands with her groom at the altar while the rest

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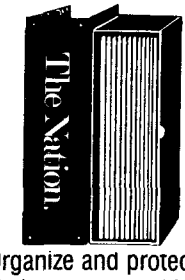

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of the church dissolves into mystery. At this crucial moment, Friedrich falls into line with the ritual by adopting the most normative of all camera angles, a squarely symmetrical shot. Meanwhile, on the soundtrack, a soul singer wails, "It should have been me." *First Comes Love* gives you all this, and it's educational, too. From the text that Friedrich includes as an intertitle, I learned how many nations grant legal status to homosexual marriages: one.

Among the festival's other highlights: a scratch animation by Cathy Joritz, *Negative Man*, that's a solid three minutes of rude hilarity; a refreshingly tart memory film by Jerry Tartaglia, *1969*, in its world premiere; revivals of classics such as Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth* and the animated version of Lenny Bruce's *Thank You, Masked Man*; and a number of new works that cast a less than happy glance at the Persian Gulf war. There's enough here that you'd be wise to call (212) 925-5883 for information, or pick up a schedule at Anthology Film Archives. The festival runs September 9 through 15.

Short Takes: *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll* is a filmed record of Eric Bogosian's most recent theater piece, in which he impersonates ten males of the present era: a subway beggar, a sanctimonious rock musician, a blue-collar party animal, a white-collar money animal. The characterizations fit together like a jigsaw puzzle; by the time the last piece clicks into place, you probably wouldn't be able to bear the composite image Bogosian has created, had he not carried you along through sheer virtuosity. The direction is by John McNaughton (who made *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*); the cinematography is by Ernest Dickerson (who has shot all of Spike Lee's films); the razor-sharp editing is by Elena Maganini. Recommended.

And I recommend that you avoid *Uranus*, the new film by Claude Berri. It's based on the novel of the same name by Marcel Aymé, who collaborated with the Nazis and then pretended that everybody else had done the same. As Aymé had it, there was no French Resistance; or, if there was, it was full of no-good Commies, so it didn't matter. Aymé put forth this crap under the name of tolerance and humanism. What name Berri has for his film, I don't know. All I can tell you is that it's full of windy tirades and ham acting—just the thing for covering up a premise that won't bear examining. □

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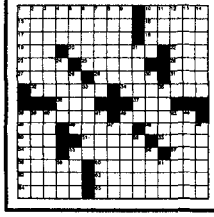

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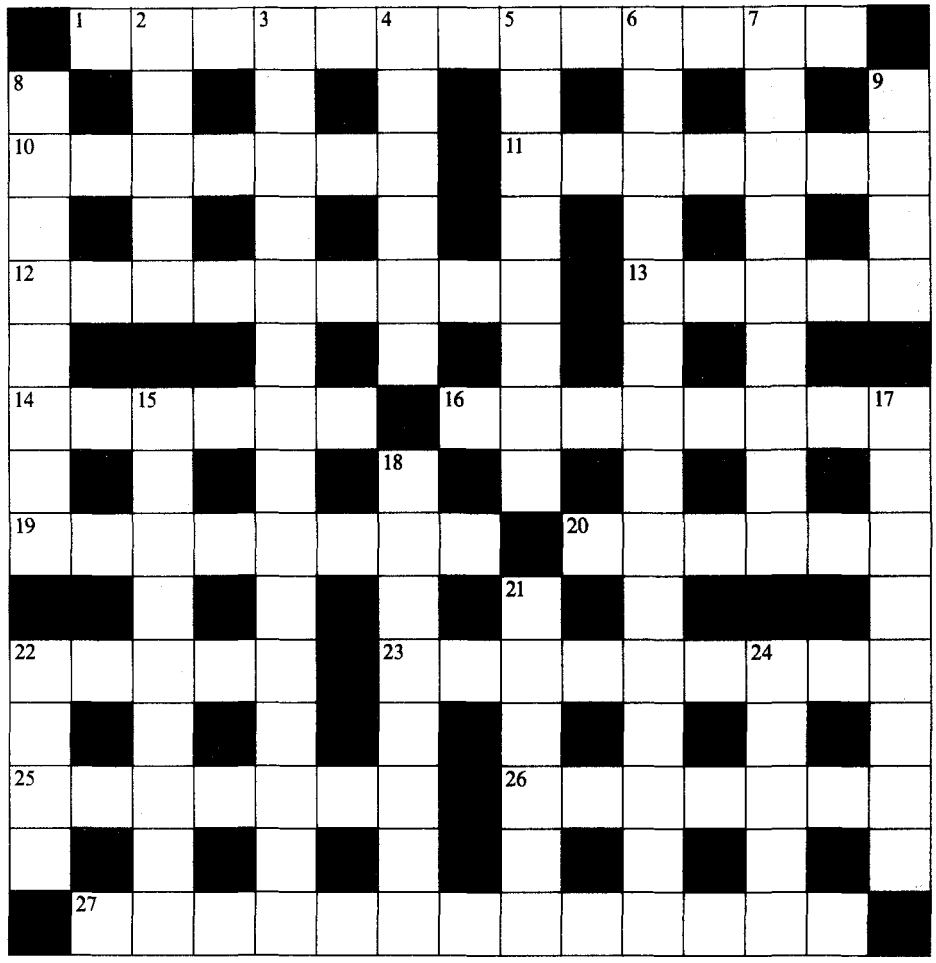

ACROSS

1 Poetry, to which the sound of a bow is said to be superior? (1,4,2,6)
10 Make starchy what is suitable in return, applied to low-lying marshy land. (7)
11 Sometimes high in Paris, a sign of the upper class is in a nice environment, possibly. (7)
12 It marks a sound increase in what might be soccer, especially around the end. (9)
13 Is the wanderer pleased? On the contrary! (5)
14 Shut up! "M" classically gets trampled in the mire! (6)
16 Does it make the tent give cover for the word sketch? (8)
19 In a way, softens G-sounds here, which should be very familiar. (8)
20 Is indicative of what one might get from the lips. (6)
22 Beethoven's was not the intoxicating type, however. (5)
23 An hour after nine, something you'd like to see grow comes back, with the people present. (9)
25 The good queen is about to pass on, in a way, which is just as well. (7)
26 Mad enough to toss a grenade! (7)
27 Such as Burke and Hare are seen, and cross by the different positions. (4-9)

DOWN

2 The wounded bird goes east, being battered by Smetana. (5)
3 Certainly not one in charge of "The Night Watch." (7,2,3,3)
4 See 9
5 Where one might reach the proper station in London? (8)
6 5 at one time by the sound of it, coming down hard on my French principal. (8,7)
7 Like Sophocles' Sphinx. (9)
8 People having only medium ability? (8)
9,4 and 21 Nurse, having a city way, in place of the minister of one 6. (3,7,6)
15 It's obvious nothing makes a more common statement of intentions! (9)
17 What you hear at a 19, perhaps, before arriving at a different section of the city and getting all around the town. (4,4)
18 A real killer, when a couple of fools get in. (8)
21 See 9
22 Lies in small, snow-colored condition. (4)
24 One who makes a bad grade was something of an 18 in Lear! (5)

SEE LAST WEEK'S SOLUTION AT LEFT

PUZZLED?

No more cross words. If you don't see why "Lures" are "Ground Rules," send for those of Mr. Lewis to *The Nation*, 72 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.

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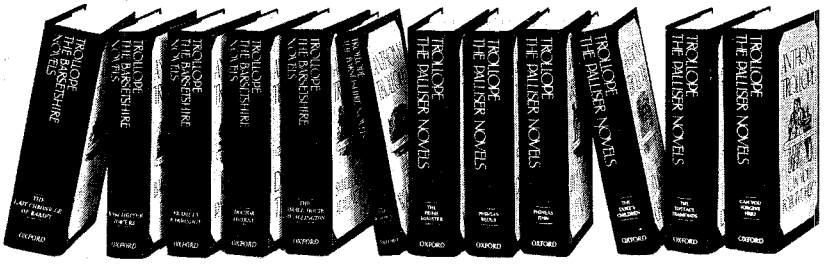

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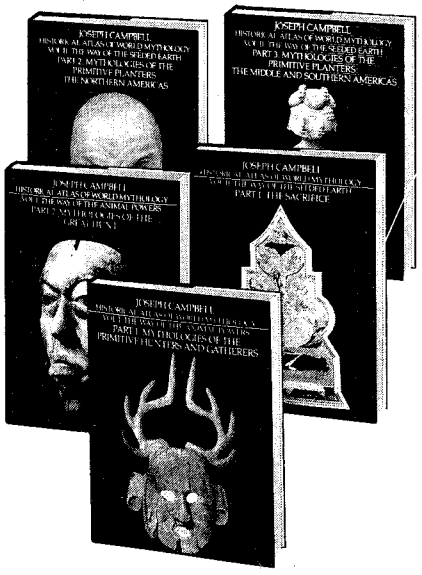

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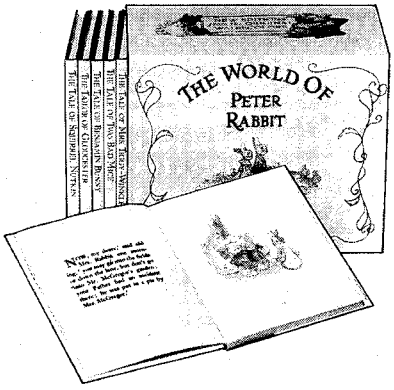

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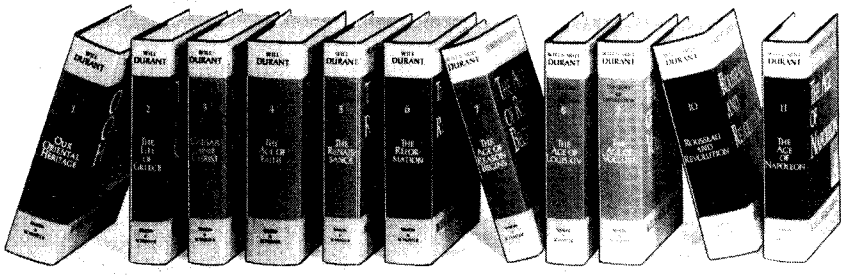

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